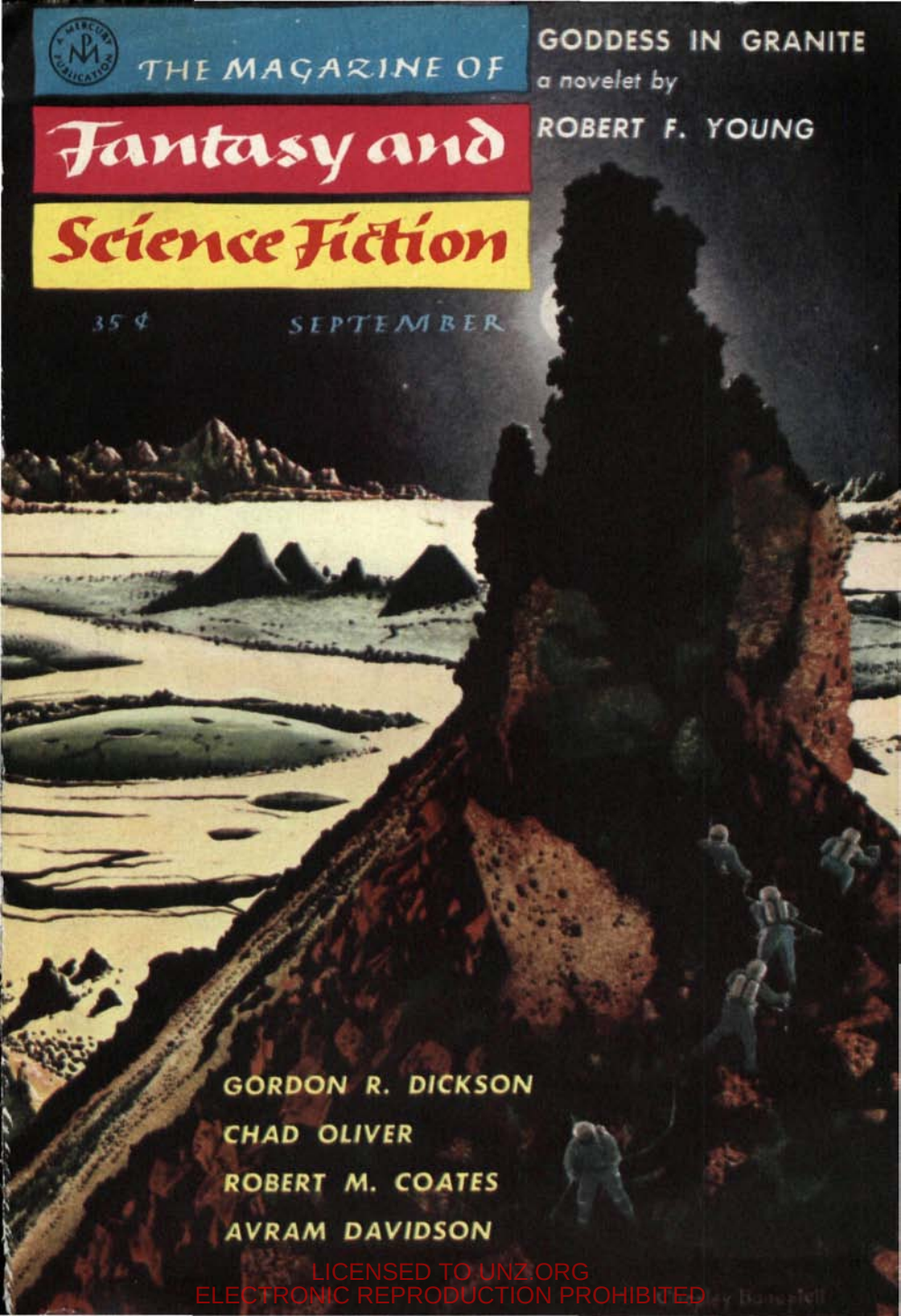

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 13, No. 3 SEPTEMBER

Goddess in Granite (*novelet*)	*by* ROBERT F. YOUNG	5
Mr. Stilwell's Stage	*by* AVRAM DAVIDSON	27
The Science Screen (*a department*)	*by* CHARLES BEAUMONT	36
A Parable of Love	*by* ROBERT M. COATES	41
The Traveling Salesman	*by* ROBERT BLOCH	57
Rewrite Man	*by* CHAD OLIVER	60
Yes, but . . . (*verse*)	*by* ANTHONY BRODE	77
A Great Deal of Weather	*by* MARK VAN DOREN	78
Recommended Reading (*a department*)	*by* ANTHONY BOUCHER	83
Overture and Beginners	*by* RACHEL MADDUX	88
St. Dragon and the George (*novelet*)	*by* GORDON R. DICKSON	94
The Wines of Earth	*by* IDRIS SEABRIGHT	125

"Coming Next Month" appears on page 56

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F&SF readers have hitherto known Robert F. Young only as the author of sensitive short stories; but like any talented writer (and Mr. Young seems to me one of the most talented newcomers of the past several years), he has more than one string to his bow. Here is a longer and more vigorous Young story—a powerful and moving tale of the sport (or the art) of mountain-climbing in the interstellar future, of a man whose explorations imperiled not only his life but his soul, and of a mysteriously landscaped Virgin which is as compellingly visual a concept as you're apt to have read in a long time.

Goddess in Granite

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

WHEN HE REACHED THE UPPER RIDGE of the forearm, Marten stopped to rest. The climb had not winded him but the chin was still miles away, and he wanted to conserve as much of his strength as possible for the final ascent to the face.

He looked back the way he had come—down the slope of the tapered forearm ridge to the mile-wide slab of the hand; down to the granite giantess-fingers protruding like sculptured promontories into the water. He saw his rented inboard bobbing in the blue bay between forefinger and thumb, and beyond the bay, the shimmering waste of the southern sea.

He shrugged his pack into a more comfortable position and checked the climbing equipment attached to his web belt—his piton pistol in its self-locking holster, his extra clips of piton cartridges, the air-tight packet that contained his oxygen tablets, his canteen. Satisfied, he drank sparingly from the canteen and replaced it in its refrigerated case. Then he lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the morning sky.

The sky was a deep, cloudless blue, and Alpha Virginis beat brightly down from the blueness, shedding its warmth and brilliance on the gynecomorphous mountain range known as the Virgin.

She lay upon her back, her blue

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lakes of eyes gazing eternally upward. From his vantage point on her forearm, Marten had a good view of the mountains of her breasts. He looked at them contemplatively. They towered perhaps 8,000 feet above the chest-plateau, but, since the plateau itself was a good 10,000 feet above sea level, their true height exceeded 18,000 feet. However, Marten wasn't discouraged. It wasn't the mountains that he wanted.

Presently he dropped his eyes from their snow-capped crests and resumed his trek. The granite ridge rose for a while, then slanted downward, widening gradually into the rounded reaches of the upper arm. He had an excellent view of the Virgin's head now, though he wasn't high enough to see her profile. The 11,000-foot cliff of her cheek was awesome at this range, and her hair was revealed for what it really was—a vast forest spilling riotously down to the lowlands, spreading out around her massive shoulders almost to the sea. It was green now. In autumn it would be brown, then gold; in winter, black.

Centuries of rainfall and wind had not perturbed the graceful contours of the upper arm. It was like walking along a lofty promenade. Marten made good time. Still, it was nearly noon before he reached the shoulder-slope, and he realized that he had badly underestimated the Virgin's vastness.

The elements had been less kind to the shoulder-slope, and he had to go slower, picking his way between shallow gullies, avoiding cracks and crevices. In places the granite gave way to other varieties of igneous rock, but the over-all color of the Virgin's body remained the same—a grayish-white, permeated with pink, startlingly suggestive of the hue of human skin.

Marten found himself thinking of her sculptors, and for the thousandth time he speculated as to why they had sculptured her. In many ways, the problem resembled such Earth enigmas as the Egyptian pyramids, the Sacsahuaman Fortress, and the Baalbek Temple of the Sun. For one thing, it was just as irresolvable, and probably always would be, for the ancient race that had once inhabited Alpha Virginis IX had either died out centuries ago, or had migrated to the stars. In either case, they had left no written records behind them.

Basically, however, the two enigmas were different. When you contemplated the pyramids, the Fortress, and the Temple of the Sun, you did not wonder *why* they had been built—you wondered *how* they had been built. With the Virgin, the opposite held true. She had begun as a natural phenomenon—an enormous geological upheaval—and actually all her sculptors had done, herculean though

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their labor had undoubtedly been, was to add the finishing touches and install the automatic subterranean pumping system that, for centuries, had supplied her artificial lakes of eyes with water from the sea.

And perhaps therein lay the answer, Marten thought. Perhaps their only motivation had been a desire to improve upon nature. There certainly wasn't any factual basis for the theosophical, sociological, and psychological motivations postulated by half a hundred Earth anthropologists (none of whom had ever *really* seen her) in half a hundred technical volumes. Perhaps the answer was as simple as that....

The southern reaches of the shoulder-slope were less eroded than the central and northern reaches, and Marten edged closer and closer to the south rim. He had a splendid view of the Virgin's left side, and he stared, fascinated, at the magnificent, purple-shadowed escarpment stretching away to the horizon. Five miles from its juncture with the shoulder-slope, it dwindled abruptly to form her waist; three miles farther on, it burgeoned out to form her left hip; then, just before it faded into the lavender distances, it blended into the gigantic curve of her thigh.

The shoulder was not particularly steep, yet his chest was tight, his lips dry, when he reached its summit. He decided to rest for a while, and he removed his pack and sat down and propped his back against it. He raised his canteen to his lips and took a long cool draft. He lit another cigarette.

From his new eminence he had a much better view of the Virgin's head, and he gazed at it spellbound. The mesa of her face was still hidden from him, of course—except for the lofty tip of her granite nose; but the details of her cheek and chin stood out clearly. Her cheekbone was represented by a rounded spur, and the spur blended almost imperceptibly with the chamfered rim of her cheek. Her proud chin was a cliff in its own right, falling sheerly—much too sheerly, Marten thought—to the graceful ridge of her neck.

Yet, despite her sculptors' meticulous attention to details, the Virgin, viewed from so close a range, fell far short of the beauty and perfection they had intended. That was because you could only see part of her at a time: her cheek, her hair, her breasts, the distant contour of her thigh. But when you viewed her from the right altitude, the effect was altogether different. Even from a height of ten miles, her beauty was perceptible; at 75,000 feet, it was undeniable. But you had to go higher yet—had to find the exact level, in fact—before you could see her as her sculptors had meant her to be seen.

To Marten's knowledge, he was the only Earthman who had ever

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found that level, who had ever seen the Virgin as she really was; seen her emerge into a reality uniquely her own—an unforgettable reality, the equal of which he had never before encountered.

Perhaps being the only one had had something to do with her effect on him; that, plus the fact that he had been only 20 at the time; 20, he thought wonderingly. He was 32 now. Yet the intervening years were no more than a thin curtain, a curtain he had parted a thousand times.

He parted it again—

After his mother's third marriage he had made up his mind to become a spaceman, and he had quit college and obtained a berth as cabin boy on the starship *Ulysses*. The *Ulysses*' destination was Alpha Virginis IX; the purpose of its voyage was to chart potential ore deposits.

Marten had heard about the Virgin, of course. She was one of the seven hundred wonders of the galaxy. But he had never given her a second thought—till he saw her in the main viewport of the orbiting *Ulysses*. Afterwards, he gave her considerable thought and, several days after planetfall, he "borrowed" one of the ship's life-rafts and went exploring. The exploit had netted him a week in the brig upon his return, but he hadn't minded. The Virgin had been worth it.

The altimeter of the life-raft had registered 55,000 feet when he first sighted her, and he approached her at that level. Presently he saw the splendid ridges of her calves and thighs creep by beneath him, the white desert of her stomach; the delicate cwm of her navel. He was above the twin mountains of her breasts, within sight of the mesa of her face, before it occurred to him that, by lifting the raft, he might gain a much better perspective.

He canceled his horizontal momentum and depressed the altitude button. The raft climbed swiftly. 60,000 feet . . . 65,000 . . . 70,000. It was like focusing a telescreen. 80,000 . . . His heart was pounding now. 90,000 . . . The oxygen dial indicated normal pressure, but he could hardly breathe.

100,000, 101,000—Not quite high enough. 102,300 . . . *Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, Comely as Jerusalem, Terrible as an army with banners* . . . 103,211 . . . *The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman* . . . 103,288—

He jammed the altitude button hard, locking the focus. He could not breathe at all now—at least not for the first, ecstatic moment. He had never seen anyone quite like her. It was early spring, and her hair was black; her eyes were a springtime blue. And it seemed to him that the mesa of her face abounded in compassion, that the

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red rimrock of her mouth was curved in a gentle smile . . .

She lay there immobile by the sea, a Brobdingnagian beauty come out of the water to bask forever in the sun. The barren lowlands were a summer beach; the glittering ruins of a nearby city were an earring dropped from her ear; and the sea was a summer lake, the liferaft, a metallic gull hovering high above the littoral—

And in the transparent belly of the gull sat an infinitesimal man who would never be the same again. . . .

Marten closed the curtain, but it was some time before the afterimage of the memory faded away. When it finally did so, he found that he was staring with a rather frightening fixity toward the distant cliff of the Virgin's chin.

Roughly, he estimated its height. Its point, or summit, was on an approximate level with the crest of the cheek. That gave him 11,000 feet. To obtain the distance he had to climb to reach the face-mesa, all he had to do was to deduct the height of the neck-ridge. He figured the neckridge at about 8,000 feet. 8,000 from 11,000 gave him 3,000—

3,000 feet!

It was impossible. Even with a piton pistol, it was impossible. The pitch was vertical all the way, and from where he sat he couldn't discern the faintest indication of a crack or a ledge on the granite surface.

He could never do it, he told himself. Never. It would be absurd for him even to try. It might cost him his life. And even if he could do it, even if he could climb that polished precipice all the way to the face-mesa, could he get back down again? True, his piton pistol would make the descent relatively easy, but would he have enough strength left? The atmosphere on Alpha Virginis IX thinned rapidly after 10,000 feet, and while oxygen tablets helped, they could keep you going only for a limited period of time. After that—

But the arguments were old ones. He had used them on himself a hundred, a thousand times . . . He stood up resignedly. He shrugged his pack into place. He took a final look down the nine-mile slope of the arm to the giantess-fingers jutting into the sea, then he turned and started across the tableland of the upper chest toward the beginning of the neck-ridge.

II

The sun had long since passed its meridian when he came opposite the gentle col between the mountains. A cold wind breathed down the slopes, drifting across the tableland. The wind was sweet, and he knew there must be flowers on the mountains—crocuses per-

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haps, or their equivalent, growing high on the snow-soft peaks.

He wondered why he did not want to climb the mountains, why it had to be the mesa. The mountains presented the greater difficulties, and therefore the greater challenge. Why, then, did he neglect them for the mesa?

He thought he knew. The beauty of the mountains was shallow, lacked the deeper meaning of the beauty of the mesa. They could never give him what he wanted if he climbed them a thousand times. It was the mesa—with its blue and lovely lakes—or nothing.

He turned his eyes away from the mountains and concentrated on the long slope that led to the neck-ridge. The pitch was gentle, but treacherous. He moved slowly. A slip could send him rolling, and there was nothing he could grasp to stop himself. He noticed the shortness of his breath and wondered at it, till he remembered the altitude. But he did not break into his oxygen tablets yet; he would have a much more poignant need for them later.

By the time he reached the ridge, the sun had half-completed its afternoon journey. But he wasn't dismayed. He had already given up the idea of assaulting the chin-cliff today. He had been presumptuous in the first place to have imagined himself capable of conquering the Virgin in a single day.

It was going to take at least two.

The ridge was over a mile wide, its curvature barely perceptible. Marten made good time. All the while he advanced, he was conscious of the chin-cliff looming higher and higher above him, but he did not look at it, he was afraid to look at it, till it loomed so close that it occulted half the sky, and then he had to look at it, had to raise his eyes from the granite swell of the throat and focus them on the appalling wall that now constituted his future.

His future was bleak. It contained no hand- or footholds; no ledges, no cracks, no projections. In a way he was relieved, for if no means existed for him to climb the chin-cliff, then he couldn't climb it. But in another way he was overwhelmingly disappointed. Gaining the face-mesa was more than a mere ambition, it was an obsession; and the physical effort that the task involved, the danger, the obstacles—all were an integral part of the obsession.

He could return the way he had come, down the arm to his inboard, and back to the isolated colony; and he could rent a flier from the hard-bitten, taciturn natives just as easily as he had rented the inboard. In less than an hour after takeoff, he could land on the face-mesa.

But he would be cheating, and he knew it. Not cheating the Virgin, but cheating himself.

There was one other way, but

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he rejected it now for the same reason he had rejected it before. The top of the Virgin's head was an unknown quantity, and, while the trees of her hair might make climbing easier, the distance to be climbed was still over three times the height of the chin-cliff, and the pitch was probably just as precipitous.

No, it was the chin-cliff or nothing. The way things looked now, it was nothing. But he consoled himself with the fact that he had only examined a relatively small section of the cliff. Perhaps the outlying sections would be less forbidding. Perhaps—

He shook his head. Wishful thinking would get him nowhere. It would be time to hope *after* he found a means of ascent, not before. He started along the base of the cliff, then paused. While he had stood there, staring at the stupendous wall, Alpha Virginis had descended unobtrusively into the molten sea. The first star was already visible in the east, and the hue of the Virgin's breasts had transmuted from gold to purple.

Reluctantly, Marten decided to postpone his investigation till tomorrow. The decision proved to be a sensible one. Darkness was upon him before he had his sleeping bag spread out, and with it came the penetrating cold for which the planet was notorious throughout the galaxy.

He set the thermostat on the sleeping bag, then he undressed and crawled into the warm interior. He munched a supper biscuit and allotted himself two swallows of water from his canteen. Suddenly he remembered that he had missed his midday meal—and had not even known the difference.

There was a parallel there somewhere, an element of *déjà vu*. But the connection was so tenuous that he could not pin the other moment down. It would occur to him later, he knew, but such was the nature of the human mind that it would occur seemingly as the result of another chain of associations, and he would not remember the original connection at all.

He lay there, staring at the stars. The dark mass of the Virgin's chin rose up beside him, hiding half the sky. He should have felt forlorn, frightened even. But he did not. He felt safe, secure. For the first time in many years, he knew contentment.

There was an unusual constellation almost directly overhead. More than anything else, it made him think of a man astride a horse. The man carried an elongated object on his shoulder, and the object could have been any one of a number of things, depending on the way you looked at the stars that comprised it—a rifle, perhaps, or a staff; maybe even a fishing pole.

To Marten, it looked like a scythe . . .

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He turned on his side, luxuriating in his tiny oasis of warmth. The Virgin's chin was soft with starlight now, and the night slept in soft and silent splendor . . . That was one of his own lines, he thought drowsily—a part of that fantastic hodgepodge of words and phrases he had put together eleven years ago under the title of *Rise Up, My Love!* A part of the book that had brought him fame and fortune—and Lelia.

Lelia . . . She seemed so long ago, and in a way, she was. And yet, in another way, a strange, poignant way, she was yesterday—

The first time he saw her she was standing in one of those little antique bars so popular, then, in Old York. Standing there all alone, tall, dark-haired, Junoesque, sipping her mid-afternoon drink as though women like herself were the most common phenomena in the galaxy.

He had been positive, even before she turned her head, that her eyes were blue, and blue they proved to be; blue with the blueness of mountain lakes in spring, blue with the beauty of a woman waiting to be loved. Boldly, he walked over and stood beside her, knowing it was now or never, and asked if he might buy her a drink.

To his astonishment, she accepted. She did not tell him till later that she had recognized him. He was so naive at the time that he did not even know that he was a celebrity in Old York, though he should have known. His book certainly had been successful enough.

He had knocked it off the preceding summer—the summer the *Ulysses* returned from Alpha Virginis IX; the summer he quit his berth as cabin boy, forever cured of his ambition to be a spaceman. During the interim consumed by the voyage, his mother had remarried again; and when he found out, he rented a summer cottage in Connecticut as far away from her as he could get. Then, driven by forces beyond his ken, he sat down and began to write.

Rise Up, My Love! had dealt with the stellar Odyssey of a young adventurer in search of a substitute for God and with his ultimate discovery of that substitute in a woman. The reviewers shouted "Epic!", and the Freudian psychologists who, after four centuries of adversity, still hadn't given up psychoanalyzing writers, shouted "Death-wish!" The diverse appraisals combined happily to stir up interest in the limited literary world and to pave the way for a second printing, and then a third. Overnight, Marten had become that most incomprehensible of all literary phenomena—a famous first-novelist.

But he hadn't realized, till now, that his fame involved physical recognition. "I read your book, Mr.

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Marten," the dark-haired girl standing beside him said. "I didn't like it."

"What's your name?" he asked. Then: "Why?"

"Lelia Vaughn . . . Because your heroine is impossible."

"I don't think she's impossible," Marten said.

"You'll be telling me next that she has a prototype."

"Maybe I will." The bartender served them, and Marten picked up his glass and sipped the cool blueness of his Martian julep. "Why is she impossible?"

"Because she's not a woman," Lelia said. "She's a symbol."

"A symbol of what?"

"I—I don't know. Anyway, she's not human. She's too beautiful, too perfect— She's a criterion, really."

"You look just like her," Marten said.

She dropped her eyes then, and for a while she was silent. Presently: "There's an ancient cliché that bears mentioning at this point," she said: "'I'll bet you tell that to all the girls—' But somehow I don't think you do."

"You're right," Marten said. "I don't." Then: "It's so close in here, can't we go walking somewhere?"

"All right . . ."

Old York was an anachronism kept alive by a handful of literati who doted on the prestige lent by old buildings, old streets, and old ways of life. It was a grim, canyonesque grotesquerie compared to its pretty new cousin on Mars; but during the years, parts of it had taken on some of the coloring and some of the atmosphere once associated with the left bank of Paris, and if the season was spring and you were falling in love, Old York was a lovely place in which to be.

They walked through the dreaming desuetude of ancient avenues, in the cool shadows of buildings mellowed by the passage of time. They lingered in the wilderness of Central Park, and the sky was blue with spring, the trees adorned with the pale greenness of nascent leaves. . . . It had been the loveliest of afternoons, and afterwards, the loveliest of evenings. The stars had never shone so brightly, nor had the moon ever been so full, the hours so swift, the minutes so sweet. Marten's head had been light, seeing Lelia home, his footsteps unsteady; but it wasn't till later, sitting on his apartment steps, that he had realized how hungry he was, and simultaneously realized that he hadn't eaten a morsel of food since morning. . . .

Deep in the alien night, Marten stirred, awakened. The strange star-patterns shocked him for a moment, and then he remembered where he was and what he was going to do. Sleep tiptoed back around him and he turned dreamily in the warmth of his electronic cocoon. Freeing one arm, he reached

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out till his fingers touched the reassuring surface of the star-kissed cliff. He sighed.

III

Dawn wore a pink dress and crept across the land like a timid girl. Her sister Morning followed, dressed in blue, the sun a dazzling locket on her breast.

There was a tightness in Marten, a tightness compounded of anticipation and dread. He did not permit himself to think. Methodically he ate his concentrated breakfast, packed his sleeping bag. Then he began a systematic examination of the Virgin's chin.

In the morning light, the cliff did not seem nearly so awesome as it had the night before. But its pitch had not varied, nor had its sheer, smooth surface. Marten was both relieved and chagrined.

Then, near the western edge of the neck ridge, he found the chimney.

It was a shallow fissure, perhaps twice the breadth of his body, created probably by a recent seismic disturbance. He remembered, suddenly, the other signs of recent seismic activity he had noticed in the colony, but had not bothered to inquire about. A dozen or so ruptured dwellings were of little consequence when you were on the verge of resolving a complex that had plagued you for twelve years.

The chimney zigzagged upwards as far as he could see, presenting, at least for the first thousand feet, a comparatively easy means of ascent. There were innumerable hand- and footholds, and occasional ledges. The trouble was, he had no way of knowing whether the holds and the ledges—or even the chimney itself—continued all the way to the summit.

He cursed himself for having neglected to bring binoculars. Then he noticed that his hands were trembling, that his heart was tight against his ribs; and he knew, all at once, that he was going to climb the chimney regardless, that nothing could stop him, not even himself; not even the knowledge, had it been available, that the chimney was a dead end.

He drew his piton pistol and inserted one of the dozen clips he carried in his belt. He aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger. The long hours he had spent practicing, while awaiting transportation from the spaceport to the colony, paid off, and the peg, trailing its almost invisible nylon line, imbedded itself in the lofty ledge he had selected for his first belay. The sound of the second charge caromed down and joined the fading sound of the first, and he knew that the steel roots of the peg had been forced deep into the granite, guaranteeing his safety for the initial 500 feet.

He replaced the pistol in its self-locking holster. From now till he

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reached the ledge, the line would take in its own slack, automatically rewinding itself in the chamber in pace with his ascent.

He began to climb.

His hands were steady now, and his heart had resumed its normal beat. There was a song in him, throbbing soundlessly through his whole being, imbuing him with a strength he had never known before, might never know again. The first 500 feet were almost ridiculously easy. Hand- and footholds were so numerous most of the way that it was like climbing a stone ladder, and in the few places where the projections petered out, the walls were ideally spaced for opposite pressure. When he reached the ledge, he wasn't even breathing hard.

He decided not to rest. Sooner or later the thinness of the atmosphere was going to catch up with him, and the higher he got, while he was still fresh, the better. He stood up boldly and drew and aimed the piton pistol. The new peg soared forth, trailing the new line and dislodging the old, arrowing into the base of another ledge some 200 feet above the one on which he stood. The range of the pistol was 1,000 feet, but the narrowness of the chimney and the awkwardness of his position posed severe limitations.

He resumed his ascent, his confidence increasing with each foot he gained. But he was careful not to look down. The chimney was so far out on the western edge of the neck-ridge that looking down entailed not only the distance he had already climbed, but the 8,000-foot drop from the ridge to the lowlands. He did not think his new confidence quite capable of assimilating the shock of so appalling a height.

The climb to the second ledge was as uneventful as the climb to the first. Again he decided not to rest, and sinking another peg into a third ledge approximately 250 feet above the second, he resumed climbing. Halfway to the third ledge, the first pangs of oxygen starvation manifested themselves in a heaviness in his arms and legs and a shortness of his breath. He slipped an oxygen tablet into his mouth and went on climbing.

The dissolving tablet revived him, and when he reached the third ledge he still did not feel like resting. But he forced himself to sit down on the narrow granite shelf and he lay his head back against the chimney wall and tried to relax. Sunlight smote his eyes and with a shock he realized that the speed of his ascent had been subjective; actually, hours had passed since he had left the neck-ridge, and Alpha Virginis was already at meridian.

Then he couldn't rest, there was no time. He had to reach the face-mesa before nightfall, else he might never reach it at all. In an instant

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he was on his feet, piton pistol drawn and aimed.

For a while the climb took on a different character. His confidence never diminished and the soundless song throbbed through him in ever-increasing cadence; but the heaviness of his limbs and the shortness of his breath recurred at more and more frequent periods, lending a dream-like quality to the adventure, and this quality, in turn, was interspersed by the brief but lucid intervals that began immediately whenever he took an oxygen tablet.

The character of the chimney, however, varied only slightly. It grew wider for a while, but he found that by bracing his back against one wall and his feet against the other, he could inch his way upward with a minimum of effort. Then the chimney narrowed again and he returned to his original mode of ascent.

Inevitably he became bolder. Up to now he had been using three-point suspension, never moving one appendage till he was certain the other three were firmly placed. But as his boldness increased, his caution diminished. He neglected three-point suspension more and more often, finally neglected it altogether. After all, he reassured himself, what difference did it make if he did slip? The piton line would stop him before he fell two feet.

And it would have too—if the particular cartridge he had just discharged had not been defective. In his haste he did not notice that the nylon line was not rewinding itself, and when the chockstone, on which he'd just put his entire weight, gave way beneath his foot, his instinctive terror was tempered by the thought that his fall would be brief.

It was not. It was slow at first, unreal. He knew instantly that something had gone wrong. Nearby, someone was screaming. For a moment he did not recognize his own voice. And then the fall was swift; the chimney walls blurred past his clawing hands, and dislodged rubble rained about his anguished face.

Twenty feet down he struck a projection on one side of the chimney. The impact threw him against the other side, then the ledge that he had left a short while before came up jarringly beneath his feet and he sprawled forward on his stomach, the wind knocked from him, blood running into his eyes from a cut on his forehead.

When his breath returned he moved each of his limbs carefully, testing them for broken bones. Then he inhaled deeply. Afterwards he lay there on his stomach for a long time, content with the knowledge that he was alive and not seriously hurt.

Presently he realized that his

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eyes were closed. Without thinking, he opened them and wiped the blood away. He found himself staring straight down at the forest of the Virgin's hair, 10,000 feet below. He sucked in his breath, tried to sink his fingers into the ungiving granite of the ledge. For a while he was sick, but gradually his sickness left him and his terror faded away.

The forest spread out almost to the sea, flanked by the magnificent precipices of the neck and shoulder, the nine-mile ridge of the arm. The sea was gold and glittering in the mid-afternoon sunlight, and the lowlands were a green-gold beach—

There was an analogy somewhere. Marten frowned, trying to remember. Hadn't he, a long time ago, crouched on another ledge—or was it a bluff?—looking down upon another beach, a real beach? Looking down at—

Abruptly he remembered, and the memory set his face on fire. He tried to force the unwanted moment back into his subconscious, but it slipped through his mental fingers and came out and stood nakedly in the sun, and he had to confront it whether he wanted to or not, had to live it over again—

After their marriage, he and Lelia had rented the same cottage in Connecticut where *Rise Up, My Love!* was born, and he had settled down to write his second book.

The cottage was a charming affair, perched on a bluff overlooking the sea. Below it, accessible by a flight of winding stairs, was a narrow strip of white sand, protected from the prying eyes of civilization by the wooded arms of a small cove. It was here that Lelia spent her afternoons sunbathing in the nude, while Marten spent those same afternoons feeding empty words and uninspired phrases into the manuscript machine on his study desk.

The new book was going very badly. The spontaneity that had characterized the creation of *Rise Up, My Love!* was no longer with him. Ideas would not come, or, if they did come, he was incapable of coping with them. A part of his mood, he knew, could be ascribed to his marriage. Lelia was everything a bride should be, but there was something she was not, an intangible something that taunted him by night and haunted him by day . . .

The August afternoon had been hot and humid. There was a breeze coming in over the sea, but while it was strong enough to ruffle the curtains of his study window, it wasn't quite strong enough to struggle through the intervening expanse of stagnant air to the doldrums of the study proper where he sat miserably at his desk.

As he sat there, fingering words and phrases, grappling with ideas, he became aware of the soft sound

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of the surf on the beach below, and an image of Lelia, lying dark and golden in the sun, intruded repeatedly on his thoughts.

Presently he found himself speculating on the positions she might be lying in. On her side, perhaps . . . or perhaps on her back, the golden sunlight raining down on her thighs, her stomach, her breasts . . .

There was a faint throbbing in his temples, a new nervousness in the fingers that toyed with the correction pencil on the desktop before him. Lelia lying immobile by the sea, her dark hair spread out around her head and shoulders, her blue eyes staring up into the sky—

How would she look from above? Say from the height of the bluff? Would she resemble another woman lying by another sea?—a woman who had affected him in some mysterious way and lent him his literary wings?

He wondered, and as he wondered his nervousness grew and the throbbing in his temples thickened and slowed till it matched the rhythmic beat of the surf.

He looked at the clock on the study wall. 2:45. There was very little time. In another half hour she would be coming up to shower. Numbly, he stood up. He walked slowly across the study, stepped into the living room; he walked across the living room and out upon the latticed porch that fronted the green lawn and the brow of the bluff and the sparkling summer sea.

The grass was soft beneath his feet and there was a dreaminess about the afternoon sunlight and the sound of the surf. When he neared the bluff he got down on his hands and knees, feeling like a fool, and crept cautiously forward. Several feet from the brow, he lowered himself to his elbows and thighs and crawled the rest of the way. He parted the long grass carefully and looked down to the white strip of beach below.

She was lying directly beneath him—on her back. Her left arm was flung out to the sea and her fingers dangled in the water. Her right knee was drawn upward, a graceful hillock of sun-gold flesh . . . and the smooth expanse of her stomach was golden too, as were the gentle mountains of her breasts. Her neck was a magnificent golden ridge leading to the proud precipice of her chin and the vast golden mesa of her face. The blue lakes of her eyes were closed in peaceful sleep.

Illusion and reality intermingled. Time retreated and space ceased to be. At the crucial moment, the blue eyes opened.

She saw him instantly. There was amazement on her face at first, then understanding (though she hadn't understood at all). Finally her lips curved in a beckoning smile and she held out her arms to him. "Come down, darling," she

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called. "Come down and see me!"

The throbbing in his temples drowned out the sound of the surf as he descended the winding stairs to the beach. She was waiting there by the sea, waiting as she had always waited, waiting for him; and suddenly he was a giant striding over the lowlands, his shoulders brushing the sky, the ground shuddering beneath his Brobdingnagian footsteps.

Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, Comely as Jerusalem, Terrible as an army with banners . . .

A breeze, born in the purple shadows between the mountains, wafted up to his eyrie, cooling his flushed face and reviving his battered body. Slowly he got to his feet. He looked up at the enigmatic walls of the chimney, wondering if they continued for the thousand-odd feet that still separated him from the summit.

He drew his piton pistol and ejected the defective cartridge; then he took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. When he replaced the pistol he experienced a wave of giddiness and he reached instinctively for the oxygen packet on his belt. Then he fumbled for the packet, frantically feeling every inch of the web surface, and finally he found the tiny rivets that had remained after the packet had been torn away during his fall.

For a while he did not move. He had but one logical course of action and he knew it: climb back down to the neck-ridge, spend the night there, and return to the colony in the morning; then arrange for transportation to the spaceport, take the first ship back to Earth, and forget about the Virgin.

He nearly laughed aloud. Logic was a fine word and an equally fine concept, but there were many things in heaven and earth that it did not encompass, and the Virgin was one of them.

He started to climb.

IV

In the neighborhood of 2,200 feet, the chimney began to change.

Marten did not notice the change at first. Oxygen starvation had decimated his awareness and he moved in a slow continuous lethargy, raising one heavy limb and then another, inching his ponderous body from one precarious position to another equally precarious —but slightly closer to his goal. When he finally did notice, he was too weary to be frightened, too numb to be discouraged.

He had just crawled upon the sanctuary of a narrow ledge and had raised his eyes to seek out another ledge at which to point his pistol. The chimney was palely lit by the last rays of the sinking sun and for a moment he thought that the diminishing light was distorting his vision.

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For there were no more ledges—

There was no more chimney either, for that matter. It had been growing wider and wider for some time; now it flared abruptly into a concave slope that stretched all the way to the summit. Strictly speaking there had never been a chimney in the first place. *In toto,* the fissure was far more suggestive of the cross section of a gigantic funnel: the part he had already climbed represented the tube, and the part he had yet to climb represented the mouth.

The mouth, he saw at a glance, was going to be bad. The slope was far too smooth. From where he sat he could not see a single projection, and while that didn't necessarily rule out the possible existence of projections, it did cancel out the likelihood of there being any large enough to enable him to use his piton pistol. He couldn't very well drive a piton if there was nothing for him to drive it into.

He looked down at his hands. They were trembling again. He started to reach for a cigarette, realized suddenly that he hadn't eaten since morning, and got a supper biscuit out of his pack instead. He ate it slowly, forced it down with a mouthful of water. His canteen was nearly empty. He smiled wanly to himself. At last he had a logical reason for climbing to the mesa; to replenish his water supply in the blue lakes.

He reached for a cigarette again and this time he pulled one out and lit it. He blew smoke at the darkening sky. He drew his feet up on the ledge and hugged his knees with his arms and rocked himself gently back and forth. He hummed softly to himself. It was an old, old tune, dating back to his early childhood. Abruptly he remembered where he had heard it and who had sung it to him, and he stood up angrily and flicked his cigarette into the deepening shadows and turned toward the slope.

He resumed his upward journey.

It was a memorable journey. The slope was just as bad as it had looked. It was impossible to ascend it vertically, and he had to traverse, zigzagging back and forth with nothing but finger-thick irregularities to support his weight. But his brief rest and his condensed meal had replenished his strength and at first he experienced no difficulties.

Gradually, however, the increasing thinness of the atmosphere caught up with him again. He moved slower and slower. Sometimes he wondered if he was making any progress at all. He did not dare lean his head back far enough to look upward, for his hand- and footholds were so tenuous that the slightest imbalance could dislodge them. And presently there was the increasing darkness to contend with too.

He regretted not having left his pack on the last ledge. It was an awkward burden and it seemed to

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grow heavier with each foot he gained. He would have loosened the straps and slipped it from his shoulders—if he had had hands to spare.

Repeatedly, sweat ran down into his eyes. Once he tried to wipe his wet forehead on the granite slope, but he only succeeded in reopening his cut, and the blood joined forces with the sweat and for a while he could not see at all. He began to wonder if the cliff was forever. Finally he managed to wipe his eyes on his sleeve, but still he could not see, for the darkness was complete.

Time blurred, ceased to be. He kept wondering if the stars were out, and when he found a set of hand- and footholds less tenuous than the preceding ones, he leaned his head back carefully and looked upward. But the blood and the sweat ran down into his eyes again and he saw nothing.

He was astonished when his bleeding fingers discovered the ledge. His reconnaissance had been cursory, but even so he had been certain that there were no ledges. But there was this one. Trembling, he inched his weary body higher and higher till at last he found purchase for his elbows, then he swung his right leg onto the granite surface and pulled himself to safety.

It was a wide ledge. He could sense its wideness when he rolled over on his back and let his arms drop to his sides. He lay there quietly, too tired to move. Presently he raised one arm and wiped the blood and sweat from his eyes. The stars *were* out. The sky was patterned with the pulsing beauty of a hundred constellations. Directly above him was the one he had noticed the night before—the rider-with-the-scythe . . .

Marten sighed. He wanted to lie there on the ledge forever, the starlight soft on his face, the Virgin reassuringly close; lie there in blissful peace, eternally suspended between the past and the future, bereft of time and motion—

But the past would not have it so. Despite his efforts to stop her, Xylla parted its dark curtain and stepped upon the stage. And then the curtain dissolved behind her and the impossible play began.

After the failure of his third novel (the second had sold on the strength of the first and had enjoyed an ephemeral success), Lelia had gone to work for a perfume concern so that he could continue writing. Later on, to free him from the burden of household chores, she had hired a maid.

Xylla was an e.t.—a native of Mizar X. The natives of Mizar X were remarkable for two things: their gigantic bodies and their diminutive minds. Xylla was no exception. She stood over seven feet tall and she had an I.Q. of less than 40.

But for all her height she was

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well-proportioned, even graceful. In fact, if her face had possessed any appeal at all, she could have passed for an attractive woman. But her face was flat, with big, bovine eyes and wide cheekbones. Her mouth was much too full, and its fullness was accentuated by a pendulous lower lip. Her hair, which, by contributing the right dash of color, might have rescued her from drabness, was a listless brown.

Marten took one look at her when Lelia introduced them, said "How do you do?" and then dismissed her from his mind. If Lelia thought a giantess could do the housework better than he could, it was all right with him.

That winter Lelia was transferred to the west coast, and rather than suffer the upkeep of two houses, they gave up the Connecticut cottage and moved to California. California was as sparsely populated now as Old York. The promised land had long since absconded starward, lay scattered throughout a thousand as yet unexploited systems. But there was one good thing about the average man's eternal hankering for green pastures: the pastures he left behind grew lush in his absence; there was plenty of space for the stay-at-homes and the stubborn; and Earth, after four centuries of opportunism, had finally settled down in its new role as the cultural center of the galaxy.

Lavish twenty-third century villas were scattered all along the California coast. Almost all of them were charming and almost all of them were empty. Lelia chose a pink one, convenient to her work, and settled down into a routine identical, except for a change from the morning to the afternoon shift, to the routine she had left behind; and Marten settled down to write his fourth book.

Or tried to.

He had not been naive enough to think that a change in scene would snap him out of his literary lethargy. He had known all along that whatever words and combinations thereof that he fed into his manuscript machine had to come from within himself. But he *had* hoped that two failures in a row (the second book was really a failure, despite its short-lived financial success) would goad him to a point where he would not permit a third.

In this he had been wrong. His lethargy not only persisted, it grew worse. He found himself going out less and less often, retiring earlier and earlier to his study and his books. But not to his manuscript machine. He read the great novelists. He read Tolstoy and Flaubert. He read Dostoievski and Stendahl. He read Proust and Cervantes. He read Balzac. And the more he read Balzac, the more his wonder grew, that this small, fat, red-faced man could have been so prolific, while

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he himself remained as sterile as the white sands on the beach below his study windows.

Around ten o'clock each evening Xylla brought him his brandy in the big snifter glass Lelia had given him on his last birthday, and he would lie back in his lazy-chair before the fireplace (Xylla had built a fire of pine knots earlier in the evening), and sip and dream. Sometimes he would drowse off for a moment, then wake with a start. Finally he would get up, cross the hall to his room, and go to bed. (Lelia had begun working overtime shortly after their arrival, and seldom got home before one o'clock).

Xylla's effect upon him was cumulative. At first he was not even conscious of it. One night he would notice the way she walked —lightly, for so ponderous a creature, rhythmically, almost; and the next night, the virginal swell of her huge breasts; and the night after that, the graceful surge of her Amazonian thighs beneath her coarse skirt. The night finally came when, on an impulse, or so he thought at the time, he asked her to sit down and talk for a while.

"If you weesh, sar," she said, and sat down on the hassock at his feet.

He hadn't expected that, and at first he was embarrassed. Gradually, however, as the brandy began its swift infiltration of his bloodstream, he warmed to the moment. He noticed the play of the firelight on her hair, and suddenly he was surprised to find that it was something more than a dull brown after all; there was a hint of redness in it, a quiet, unassuming redness that offset the heaviness of her face.

They talked of various things—the weather mostly, sometimes the sea; a book Xylla had read when she was a little girl (the only book she had ever read); Mizar X—When she spoke of Mizar X, something happened to her voice. It grew soft and childlike, and her eyes, which he had thought dull and uninteresting, became bright and round, and he even detected a trace of blueness in them. The merest trace, of course, but it was a beginning.

He began asking her to stay every night after that, and she was always willing, always took her place dutifully on the hassock at his feet. Even sitting, she loomed above him, but he did not find her size disquieting any more, at least not disquieting in the sense that it had been before. Now her vast presence had a lulling effect upon him, lent him a peace of sorts. He began looking forward more and more to her nightly visits.

Lelia continued to work overtime. Sometimes she did not come in till nearly two. He had been concerned about her at first; he had even reprimanded her for working so hard. Somewhere along the line, though, he had

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stopped being concerned. Abruptly he remembered the night Lelia had come home early; the night he had touched Xylla's hand . . .

He had been wanting to touch it for a long time. Night after night he had seen it lying motionless on her knee and he had marveled again and again at its symmetry and grace, wondered how much bigger than his hand it was, whether it was soft or coarse, warm or cold. Finally the time came when he couldn't control himself any longer, and he bent forward and reached out—and suddenly her giantess fingers were intertwined with his pygmy ones and he felt the warmth of her and knew her nearness. Her lips were very close, her giantess-face, and her eyes were a vivid blue now, a blue lake blue. And then the coppices of her eyebrows brushed his forehead and the red rimrock of her mouth smothered his and melted into softness and her giantess-arms enfolded him against the twin mountains of her breasts—

Then Lelia, who had paused shocked in the doorway, said: "I'll get my things . . ."

The night was cold, and particles of hoarfrost hovered in the air, catching the light of the stars. Marten shivered; sat up. He looked down into the pale depths below, then he lifted his eyes to the breathless beauty of the twin mountains. Presently he stood up and turned toward the slope, instinctively raising his hands in search of new projections.

His hands brushed air.

He stared. There were no projections. There was no slope. There had never been a ledge, for that matter. Before him lay the mesa of the Virgin's face, pale and poignant in the starlight.

V

Marten moved across the mesa slowly. All around him the starlight fell like glistening rain. When he came to the rimrock of the mouth, he pressed his lips to the cold ungiving stone. "Rise up, my love!" he whispered.

But the Virgin remained immobile beneath his feet, as he had known she would, and he went on, past the proud tor of her nose, straining his eyes for the first glimpse of the blue lakes.

He walked numbly, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He hardly knew he walked at all. The lure of the lakes, now that they were so close, was overwhelming. The lovely lakes with their blue beckoning deeps and their promise of eternal delight. No wonder Lelia, and later, Xylla, had palled on him. No wonder none of the other mortal women he had slept with had ever been able to give him what he wanted. No wonder he had come back, after twelve futile years, to his true love.

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The Virgin was matchless. There were none like her. None.

He was almost to the cheekbone now, but still no starlit sweep of blue rose up to break the monotony of the mesa. His eyes ached from strain and expectation. His hands trembled uncontrollably.

And then, suddenly, he found himself standing on the lip of a huge, waterless basin. He stared, dumbfounded. Then he raised his eyes and saw the distant coppice of an eyebrow outlined against the sky. He followed the line of the eyebrow to where it curved inward and became the barren ridge that once had been the gentle isthmus separating the blue lakes—

Before the water had drained away. Before the subterranean pumping system had ceased to function, probably as a result of the same seismic disturbance that had created the chimney.

He had been too impetuous, too eager to possess his true love. It had never occurred to him that she could have changed, that—

No, he would not believe it! Believing meant that the whole nightmarish ascent of the chin-cliff had been for nothing. Believing meant that his whole life was without purpose.

He lowered his eyes, half-expecting, half-hoping to see the blue water welling back into the empty socket. But all he saw was the bleak lake bottom—and its residue—

And such strange residue. Scatterings of gray, stick-like objects, curiously shaped, sometimes joined together. Almost like—like—

Marten shrank back. He wiped his mouth furiously. He turned and began to run.

But he did not run far, not merely because his breath gave out, but because, before he ran any farther, he had to know what he was going to do. Instinctively he had headed for the chin-cliff. But would becoming a heap of broken bones on the neck-ridge be any different, basically, from drowning in one of the lakes?

He paused in the starlight, sank to his knees. Revulsion shook him. How could he have been so naive, even when he was 20, as to believe that he was the only one? Certainly he was the only Earthman—but the Virgin was an old old woman, and in her youth she had had many suitors, conquering her by whatever various means they could devise, and symbolically dying in the blue deeps of her eyes.

Their very bones attested to her popularity.

What did you do when you learned that your goddess had feet of clay? What did you do when you discovered that your true love was a whore?

Marten wiped his mouth again. There was one thing that you did *not* do—

You did not sleep with her . . .

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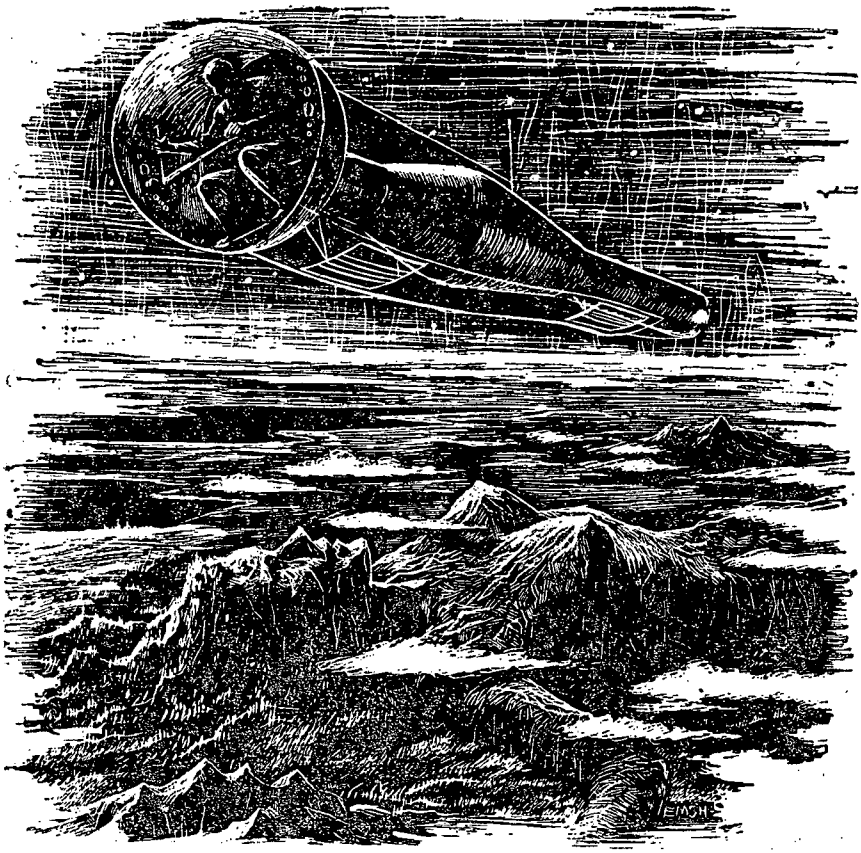
– Dawn was a pale promise in the east. The stars had begun to fade. Marten stood on the edge of the chin-cliff, waiting for the day.

He remembered a man who had climbed a mountain centuries ago, and buried a chocolate bar on the summit. A ritual of some kind, meaningless to the uninitiated. Standing there on the mesa, Marten buried several items of his own. He buried his boyhood and he buried *Rise Up, My Love!* He buried the villa in California and he buried the cottage in Connecticut. Last of all—with regret, but with finality—he buried his mother.

He waited till the false morning had passed, till the first golden fingers of the sun reached out and touched his tired face. Then he started down.



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In which Mr. Davidson tells, with characteristic style and finesse, of a form of entertainment which might have annihilated television in its cradle . . . if the inventor had kept his mind upon purely scientific objectives.

Mr. Stilwell's Stage

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

THIS HAPPENED IN THE SPRING OF 1940, in New York. The Depression was behind, the War (for us, at least) had not yet come. The violets were out, up at N.Y.U., and the bedding was being aired at windows down at Orchard Street —both sure signs of Spring. The Wilkie boom was getting under way, and so was the No Foreign War Committee; the British Consulate was picketed by party-liners who bore placards reading THE YANKS ARE NOT COMING, and LET GOD SAVE THE KING.

In the morning Edward Bunsen of the Inventors' Enterprise Company had dealt with correspondence concerning some plans to be submitted to the Patent Office. In the evening he was due to meet one of the Company's chief backers at that gentleman's home to discuss Money. As a rule Bunsen—on behalf of I.E.C.'s investors—did not see people who came with inventions unless they had some sort of reference. Crackpots could take up all his time if he would let them, and then they were apt to make nuisances of themselves for long after; hanging around the office, telephoning, writing threatening letters, sometimes even instituting lawsuits. None of them had ever won, of course, because none of them had ever had a case—I.E.C. didn't operate on those lines—but it took up time and it used up money.

Still, you never knew: once the receptionist had turned away a wild and haggard man who had something in an old coffee can which he said would revolutionize the manufacture of saddle soap. He had gone, muttering and gesticulating, to another company—the receptionist *there* was A Sportsman's Daughter, and she got him a hearing, and his gunk was put on the market, and it *did* revolutionize the manufacture of saddle soap.

Those things could happen, they

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were among the hazards of the chase, but I.E.C. felt it was worth it. Their receptionists were well-trained.

Just after Bunsen came back from lunch (he had his own entrance and did not have to pass through the front office—he had his own phone, too, chiefly because of the former Mrs. Bunsen, who remained on good terms and had thought nothing of asking the switchboard girl if *she* knew if abortions were *really* legal in Cuba? and similar questions, indicative of her big heart and little sense) he flicked a switch on the office intercom box and was about to call his secretary when he heard the tinkle of music and the sound of happy laughter.

Bunsen was surprised rather than annoyed; it was Spring, but this had never happened any other Spring, nor anything like it. He went out to the front office, not to make a fuss, but just to see what was up.

All of them, every one of them, was crowded around something on the receptionist's desk. He was tall enough to look over their heads. He saw a sort of box, a miniature stage complete with curtains, and a dog who was dancing on it to the music of what sounded like an old-fashioned music box. The music box was nowhere to be seen, but *that* was nothing; what held Bunsen's attention was that the dog was on scale with the stage: it must have been about an inch long. While the young women *oh*'d and *ah*'d the dog suddenly stopped dancing and faced off stage while it went through the motions of barking. The tiny jaws worked rapidly, but there was no sound from the stage except the tinkle of the music box, even when the animal faced the crowd in front.

One of the girls turned around and saw Bunsen then; she tried to assume a deprecating expression, but couldn't keep it up. Breaking into a smile, she said, "Oh, Mr. Bun Sen, just look! It's so cute!"

They all turned around at this, and then the music stopped, abruptly. He couldn't see the stage anymore because Mrs. Wimpold, the bookkeeper, was wedged in front of it like a piece of Roman siege-machinery, but he heard someone say, "Oh, please, Mr. Stilwell, turn it on again!" Bunsen moved forward and saw the man. He was fiftyish-looking and had a rather pursy jowly sort of face, and on it the look of a man who knows he has said or done something purposely funny, but prefers not to laugh at his own cleverness.

Bunsen felt that he knew—just from that one glance—a lot about Mr. Stilwell. Mr. Stilwell had never joined the I AM, but he had probably been a Rosicrucian. On deciding that the fiscal and social cosmogony of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Reader's Digest* was not, after all, the correct one,

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Mr. Stilwell had delved—not into Marxism, but into Technocracy and the descendants of the Greenback movement. He did not Drink, but when he *did* drink, he showed his lack of practice. Mr. Stilwell believed that there was A Lot *To* what was said by the practitioners of Mrs. Eddy's soothing science, but when he felt unwell he bought whatever nostrum was being currently touted on the radio because The Government wouldn't Let Them Get Away With It if They weren't telling the truth. And *Mrs.* Stilwell was certainly a fine wife to him, but by this time she was perhaps not quite so certain that he was going to Make Good and Show Them All.

Making a quick decision, Bunsen (who was almost never faced with the need for office discipline) decided not to make an issue of the thing. He broke one of his own rules.

"Will you come inside, please, Mr. Stilwell?" he asked. The man appeared to reflect on the matter. He looked as if he were about to say that he Didn't Mind If He Did, but what he actually said was, "Why yes, sir. Just one moment."

He turned to the women and began to smile and bow in a manner which Bunsen mentally labeled Old Cunnel. By a steady flow of *Will you excuse me, miss?* and *I'm very sorry to bother you, ma'am,* and *Thank you, thank you very much,* he managed to clear away the crowd of women and get his stage back into a container. Then, still smiling and bowing and making courtly gestures with his hat, he followed Bunsen into the inner office.

Dealing as he did more with things than with people, Bunsen seldom found it necessary to be a bastard, but he expected nothing from Mr. Stilwell and was prepared to suggest he go visit the firm which had taken on the mad saddle-soap chemist. He gestured the man to a seat, where he faced Bunsen with the self-conscious pursy smile still on his face.

"Suppose you tell me a little something about your device," Bunsen suggested, sliding out a drawer where a watch lay, face up—drawer-sliding was so much more tactful than clock-watching.

"Well," Mr. Stilwell began—only, as he accompanied it with (so Bunsen thought) a pointless chuckle, it sounded more like "Weh-hell."

"I prefer to let my own work praise me in the gates, so to speak. May I, ah, *demonstrate* it?" He unpacked the stage and placed it on the desk. It was well-made, certainly. In between attempts to defeat inertia and start a perpetual motion, Stilwell had probably turned out some nifty birdhouses.

Bunsen asked, "What kind of wood is this?"

The inventor said, "Mahogany, sir. The *best.*" He touched a stud

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and the curtain rolled up. The interior of the stage was dark.

"Honduras? Or British Honduras?" Bunsen cared absolutely nothing about the origin of the mahogany; he was making talk to cover the concentration with which he stared at the darkness onstage. The model theater was standing in full light from the fluorescent fixtures over Bunsen's desk; there was no possible way the interior *could* be dark . . . but it was. Tentatively he extended a finger, Stilwell making no objection. No, there was no obstruction there to cut off the light. A slight tingling in his finger . . . but he may have imagined it. Across the far corner of his mind the phrase *Darkness which could be felt* came and went before he could ponder it. Stilwell said nothing, had (perhaps) not noticed. He pressed another stud and then a third. The tinkle of the music box started again (probably in the base of the stage, Bunsen thought) and the little dog trotted out and began his dance once more. The tiny figure was outlined as if with a spotlight . . .

Only there *was* no spotlight.

Only the office lights and the darkness of the little stage and the minute area of light that accompanied the dog in his none-too-skilled dancings. Abruptly, Bunsen reached out his hand again. He met with nothing he could feel—unless there really *was* a tingle—but the image of the dog seemed to blur at the point where it touched his finger. Bunsen shivered a bit and shuddered a bit—the way he did when someone drew a shovel raspingly along a sidewalk. The papers on his desk dealt with a way to reduce the oil content in squeezed citrus juice; it seemed a hell of a long way from what he was now looking at.

"Ahhh . . . Mr. Stilwell . . ."

"Yessir?"

Bunsen wanted a drink from the water cooler, decided to skip it. He said, "Mmm . . . is there anything else? Or just the dog?"

Mr. Stilwell said, "Oh . . . Anything can be arranged. Just *any*thing: like, um, lions and lion-tamers, elephants, the U. S. Marine Corps Band, opera, plays, tales of romance and revenge"—again, his silly chuckle—"only, as my means are rather, uh, *lim*ited right just now . . . weh-hell . . ."

"Just so. . . . All right, Mr. Stilwell, I've seen enough."

Mr. Stilwell pressed studs. The music stopped. The light went out. The curtain went down with a tiny rustle. The two men looked at one another; Stilwell pleased and pompous, Bunsen poker-faced.

"What do you have in mind for your invention? For its uses, I mean?"

Mr. Stilwell pursed his ample lips, considered. "Weh-hell . . . home entertainment, for *one* thing; and store-window advertisement, maybe . . . You take this television

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they've been talking about, oh, for *years,* now"—he leaned over and became patronizingly confidential —"they haven't got it *yet.* And who knows when or *if* they will? Now, you take the Ancients, Mr. Bunsen —" Bunsen's face displayed uncertainty as to which ancients he was supposed to take, or where he was supposed to take them. Smiling blandly, Stilwell said, "That is to say, the *Wis* dom of the Ancients. Mu. Atlantis, Lemuria. The old legends of the talking mirror. Wehhell. I'd better not digreh-hess. *Any* way: A chimera, is what *I* think this television is. But my stage is as good as any television could be, and it's *here.* A bird in the hand, you know," he said, with ponderous archness.

Bunsen nodded slowly. He said, ". . . I don't want to ask you just yet to explain the principle involved, or to show me any plans . . . but the decision as to whether I.E.C. takes this up or not doesn't depend entirely on me."

Stilwell rapidly bobbed his head. "I understand, sir. You have to consult with your associates, your principals. I understand, I expected nothing else. Now—suppose I leave this with you? To show them? And I'll inquire back in, oh, about a week? *All* right. Oh, about these buttons or switches. *Ver*-y simple: top to bottom: music, curtain, performance, end performance, down curtain, end music. Clear? *All* right."

Bunsen ran through them all, and Stilwell showed him how to pack the little stage away in its container. Then he bowed and weaved himself out. Before the door had closed Bunsen had begun to make up for lost time. The thing was to get the last drop of sweet juice out without releasing the first drop of bitter oil. The rind . . .

Finally the day at the office closed. Bunsen had dinner at his usual small restaurant. Then he got in his car and began the ride up to Westchester. Nicholas Black lived there, the famous Nicky Black of years ago and Prohibition, that Experiment Noble In Purpose. Black was now "retired," richer than ever, respectable as any Federal government could wish, though his personal habits were in no way diminished by his retired way of life or advancing age. Nicholas Black was I.E.C.'s principal stockholder, and a good thing he had in it, too.

Driving through the Bronx, Bunsen idled with the idea of picking up Stilwell and taking him along. On impulse, he took a left turn and drove to the address given on the form filled out by the receptionist. It was a two-and-a-half-story wooden house in a street filled with such houses, all wooden and all shabby, and all long since divided up into flats. Some had store fronts built into them. Stilwell's house had a defeated-looking

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tree in the front yard and on it was a sign reading MRS. MUNGO, CORSETS. Bunsen ran his finger over the name plates at the door. Mungo, Goldberg, McCooey, Hart, and one was blank but in the frame was wedged a scrap of paper: *Joey—Gone to Aunt Irma's. Ma.* Mr. Stilwell's name was Edgar. But this was the address. Perhaps he was only a roomer. Bunsen shrugged, rang the lowest bell, that of Mrs. Mungo. Since she was, in a way, a public character, she must expect the consequences.

As the answering buzz came, he pushed through the door, and saw another one open in the hallway inside. A smell of bacon smoke and boiling cabbage came out, followed by the head of a woman who was chewing something. "I'm looking for Mr. Stilwell, please." The head (it appeared to have been fashioned by an apprentice doll-maker; Bunsen caught himself looking closely at the hairline for signs of glue) was followed by a body. Mrs. Mungo evidently did not use her own products.

"Why he don't live here no more," she said, frowning and swallowing and coming forward.

Bunsen shrugged. "This is the address I was given." He was set to go; it didn't matter if Stilwell had given an old address, they weren't going to bond the man. People had their odd ways. But Mrs. Mungo was not anxious to withdraw. Doing some hasty dental work with her tongue, she surged up to the front door.

"No, they moved right after Louise had all that trouble."

Again Bunsen started to leave. He was not particularly interested in the Stilwells' domestic difficulties, but Mrs. Mungo had somehow wedged herself between him and the door. Short of trying a judo hold there seemed no alternative but to stay and listen.

"I presume you know them, so I'm not revealing anything, but—*Was*n't that a *ter*rible thing? He took it like a gentleman, though, I must say. 'I forgive you, Louise,' he hollered—I could *hear* him, right-through-the-wall!" She pumped her head up and down. "'I forgive you, Louise,' he hollered. 'It's *my* fault I cou'n't give you the things you deserve,' he said. Oh, he admitted *that* all right. He says, 'I forgive you' and she says back to him, oh, crying something awful, 'But I can't forgive my*self*,' she says. Sobbing, you know. And crying? . . . I'm sorry that I can't tell you where they went, but they didn't tell me." An aggrieved note came into her voice. "Although I sh'd think they *might* of, Louise and me being so close. After all, it was *me* who found her with her head by the gas oven, *Me*." She thumped the place where her bosom had once been. "I heard the lil dog whimpering and I climbed right-through-the-window, and *if* I *hadn't*—"

But this was too much, far too

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much. Mrs. Mungo unwisely moved just enough to give him clearance, and Bunsen slithered through. "I'm very sorry to have bothered you," he said, sincerely enough, over his shoulder, and walked rapidly away, half-fearful that Mrs. Mungo would come pounding after and drag him back. What *had* Louise done? Dropped a half-pound of supermarket sliced bacon in her reticule, no doubt, and been picked up by the Pinkertons. Well, it wasn't any of his business. He drove off.

Nicholas Black lived in a large well-kept house like any other, in a village full of large well-kept houses. An unobtrusive couple who performed all the domestic duties lived there with him. Black had no immediate family.

"Hello, Ed," he greeted Bunsen, and looked at the case he was carrying. "Should've had Carl give you a hand with that. Something to show me?"

"After the usual business, yes." Bunsen noticed, with some relief, as he looked around the well-furnished room, that tonight there were no traces of female guests he was not intended to meet. No long gloves on the couch, no expensive handbag on the chair, no fur stole. Once, some months before, he had been rather surprised to see a cheap brown pair of women's houseshoes somewhere about. Nicholas Black wasn't the sort to entertain women who wore cheap, brown houseshoes. Anyway, they weren't there when he had gotten ready to leave.

An hour passed, devoted to talk of figures and sums. Finally Bunsen packed away the papers and Black said, "Well, now for a drink and a look at whatever-it-is in the case here." Black never drank while there was talk of money. The drink was made and accepted and Bunsen drank half of it before he began to unpack the stage.

"This was made by some odd character who thinks that television is a chimera."

Black grunted. "I just wish *we'd* put some money into that chimera," he said. "It will be on the market before a lot of people expect it to."

He looked like a turtle from whose jaws a fish had just escaped. Bunsen had the stage ready. "What interests me most in this is the lighting." He pressed the UP CURTAIN stud. "Or rather, the darkening . . . here, turn that lamp full on it . . . you see? Stage remains dark. Can't you imagine what uses might be made of a method of lighting just part of an area while the rest stays dark?"

Black nodded slowly and looked intently at the stage. Bunsen started the music and then pressed the third stud for the performance. "Never mind that dog," he said.

"What dog?" Black asked; but Bunsen didn't answer at once because he saw that there *was* no dog on the stage. Instead, a tiny

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man, dressed in green, was dancing —or rather, capering. Not a very young man, to judge from the figure. The face was masked.

"Robin Hood, I suppose that's what he's meant to be." A feathered cap was cocked on the man's head, he had a bow and quiver slung about him. "That's funny—there was a dog the last time. . . . Well, he *said* it could show *anything* . . . Now watch that lighting; d'you see?"

Black waved him aside impatiently, said, "Yeah, yeah." Suddenly, two figures were on the little stage.

"If that's Maid Marian, she's kind of pudgy for the role."

Solemnly and awkwardly the two figures performed the dance. They bowed towards each other, removed their masks, and then bowed down stage. Bunsen leaned close, suddenly noticed that the woman was wearing a tiny pair of what seemed to be brown house-shoes. Then he looked up at their faces.

The words formed in Bunsen's mind, Why, that's *him*—the pursy jowly self-consciously clever smile was almost absent, though, from the tiny features: the face was taut with fear or hate, an edge of teeth gleamed—all in a second Bunsen turned from the stage to Black, but before he could say the words his mind had formed, he saw Black lunge forward in his chair, face scarlet.

"Louise!" cried Nicholas Black.

Everything happened so quickly. The tiny figure in the green dress covered her face with a tiny hand, and the man whipped off his bow and fitted it with an arrow he had plucked from over his shoulder. Bunsen afterwards was never sure if the arrow had been shot or not, because he dashed his hand at the stage and knocked it to the ground. Even before he heard it strike the floor he turned around and Black was slumped in the chair, eyes open, mouth open . . .

"I told him, I don't *know* how many times, that he couldn't keep on, carry on, like he did—like he was a twenty-year-old," the doctor said, later, putting his stethoscope away. "But he'd laugh at me, or snarl at me, as his mood might be, and he'd say, 'I take what I want and I do what I want.' Well, well . . . *he* went quickly, want to or *not*. Just fell over in his chair, you say? I'm not surprised."

It was morning before Bunsen finally got away. At his home, he set up the stage and pressed the studs. Nothing happened. Finally, he took a knife and a screwdriver and forced the base open. There was nothing in it—nothing, that is, that could have made it work. Nothing that could give any hint or explanation of how it *had* worked. There was a piece of amber, a crystal which might have come from an old radio set, a vial of

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quicksilver which must have shattered when he knocked the stage over, some long strands of faded blonde hair running through everything—odds and ends like that. Really, nothing . . .

Bunsen's "private investigators" found no trace of the Stilwells. From whatever down-at-heels world they had come, it appeared that they had returned there once more—furnished rooms in old, shabby houses, with great new hopes for each new job ("Why, one of our men made $125 last week selling Watkins Products!"), lots and lots of solemn talk about The Wisdom Of The Ancients and, like a concealing fog or pall, the smell of bacon smoke and boiled cabbage . . .

Just what had occurred between them and Black might be conjectured, never proven.

And although Bunsen tried to repair the model stage, tried to fix it up with another vial of quicksilver and fit it all together again; although he often—when his door is locked—spends long periods pressing the studs, nothing ever happens. It is a long time now, and it begins to seem as if it never *could* have happened—though he knows it did. But Mr. Stilwell's stage had played its single "tale of romance and revenge," and it has never given another performance.

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The Science Screen

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

UPON RETIRING FROM THE BUSINESS of reviewing films, Wolcott Gibbs said, with characteristic acerbity: ". . . it is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum." He went on to comment that the one or two pictures a year, at most, "which defiantly photograph some recognizable fragment of our common experience" generally lose money and that no one could hope to find regular employment writing about them.

So he quit. And, to an extent, I sympathize with him, for there is at least a trace of truth in his sweeping indictment. Only a trace, to be sure: no year passes, as we all know, without a good dozen or so first-rate movies; and whether or not one elects to go on working in the oyster beds depends entirely upon how well one likes pearls. In rereading Mr. Gibbs's farewell address, however, I could not help a certain amount of reflection on this phase of my activities, which is now in its second year. Was it, I wondered, preposterous to continue writing about the current science fiction films? Certainly they had been almost uniformly poor. In fact, out of some fifty that I'd seen, how many had I been able to recommend? Two? Three?*

The ratio of ninety bad to ten good was sufficient to send Mr. Gibbs running before he'd served twelve months. Yet I was toiling along in the face of far more staggering odds, and, incredibly enough, feeling very little pain. Why?

If I may be allowed a bit of philosophy before jumping into THE ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS, I should say that the answer to the question, *Why do we go to s.f. films?* (pondered by all of us, perhaps, at one time or another) may lie in the notion that life itself is a welter of mediocre experiences and that living is the willingness to tolerate these while searching for something better. I have had

*Well, to be exact, four, plus a further quartet of cooler commendations. And why do reviewers (I know I do it myself) tend to remember the miseries more feelingly than the happy times?—A. B.

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golden moments in dark little theaters, moments I might never have had if I'd thrown up my hands and said the hell with it; so have you. And it is these moments that we will remember. So let us never be ashamed of paying good money to the THE ZOMBIES OF MORA TAU. We're just playing a long shot, that's all; and sometimes—*sometimes*—the long shot comes in and we're rich.

I am grieved to report, in view of the above rationale, that the members of this month's scuderia couldn't win a race with an arthritic turtle. All are bad, but there are only two of the sort that make you want to stand up in the theater and bark like a seal, and we might as well dispense with them first. THE MAN WHO TURNED TO STONE (Katzman-Columbia) didn't, of course, and I can think of nothing in the film to justify the title other than its ability to paralyze the nerve centers of any hapless and unwary audience. It is true that I was not in the best of shape to begin with, having earlier in the day been forced to listen to the television reruns (adored by my son) of RED PLANET MARS and SON OF KONG—I woke up that morning to a shriek of "We've done it! *We've contacted another planet!*" and I can tell you, it is a bad way to wake up—but even so, I do not believe it works an unfairness on this film to state that it is the most monumentally foolish bit of Edam to come along since KING DINOSAUR. The theme (a bunch of immortals trying to stay that way) isn't bad, when you get down to it. But the plot in which it is buried is infantile, and the treatment falls far short of the standards set by the old *Terror Tales*—which is bitter criticism indeed, for it is obvious that the producers did their best to emulate the rather special tone of that unlamented publication. I cannot, or will not, remember any of the details of the story; that would be like attempting to recall each individual thrust of the drill during an eighty-minute session with the dentist. However, I retain the general impression that it concerns a group of fiends who have somehow managed to get themselves installed as officers in a women's prison. A social worker (Ann Doran), newly employed at the pokey, notices that the death rate is a bit on the high side, and essays a private investigation. This brings the Chief Ogre (Victory Jory) out of his pad. With all the conviction of a ghoul surprised at brunch, he suggests that the young lady is prey to a vivid imagination. What, he demands to know, is so unusual about the totally unexplained disappearance of a few dozen girls in the space of a year? Nothing, the employee admits, once she's thought it over. Well, then, why is she creeping around,

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peering into files and otherwise making a pest of herself? No reason, she guesses; just silly feminine curiosity. Of course, smiles Jory—straightening an ascot which went out of style around the turn of the century—of course. But the young lady is not so easily mollified the next day when she discovers a prisoner hanging dead from the ceiling. And when Bruno (or Monk) the handyman bursts into the dormitory, frothing at the chops and mumbling, "Girl, girl, girl," our heroine begins to suspect that things are not quite copacetic at this hoosegow. A handsome psychiatrist is called in forthwith to give a look-see. He wastes no time in finding out that the prison staff is comprised of a sneaky crew of three-hundred-year-old loonies. Miss Doran comments that she just knew it would turn out to be something like that; then Bruno comes and carries her off. "Stop, you devil!" cries the handsome psychiatrist, who is by now hopelessly in love with the social worker. "Girl," says Bruno. "Girl, girl."

At this point the picture begins to get a little corny. We discover that in order to stay alive, the various officers of the prison must receive regular doses of energy. It is really an involved process, best described by the producers themselves. I quote from the advertising poster: "Source: beautiful young girls . . . ages seventeen to twenty-eight . . . Technique: Bio-lectrical energy is drained from the victims' bodies and fed into Stone Man's brain by electro-inductive transfusion!" If that isn't clear enough, then I don't know what you want.

Anyway, the characters all go galloping off like Roman ponies, tearing the plot to pieces, and when things finally reach an impasse, somebody sets fire to the whole mess.

THE ZOMBIES OF MORA TAU (Katzman-Columbia) is less successful, on the whole. Apart from the distinction of presenting the most ineffectual monsters ever seen (the hero has no trouble shaking off three of them at a time) it has nothing to recommend it. Raymond T. Marcus did the screenplay, or so the credits claim. I personally cannot imagine how the man who wrote THE MAN WHO TURNED TO STONE could descend so abruptly to these depths, but I suppose that's Hollywood.

Unless my informants have taken to deceiving me for the sake of color (and I must have informants, for I was barred from all press showings long ago), there is a neat little story behind KRONOS (UA). According to the rumble, a couple of special effects men got together a while back and decided to build a science fiction type monster. When it was finished, they took it to a studio, plunked it on a producer's desk, and told him

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that all they needed now was a script and they would have a keen s.f. movie. The producer liked the monster. He said OK, why not, and assigned the screenplay, and lo! KRONOS was born. It isn't much of a film, but at least it doesn't batter away relentlessly at one's intelligence and that may be why I'm disposed kindly toward it. Jeff Morrow is horribly miscast as the boy-scientist, but he's a fine actor and somehow is able to surmount his difficulties. The same cannot, unfortunately, be said for anyone else in the picture. The plot is the old invasion thing again, with nothing new in it. A space craft crashes into the sea near a small Mexican village; a giant "creature" emerges from it and begins to stalk the land. The "creature" is big but astoundingly clumsy: a sort of square skyscraper on piston-like legs. The "legs" pump up and down, which ought to have buried the Infernal Invader up to its eyelashes in ten minutes flat, but no such thing happens: the vertical action allows it to walk. Kronos' purpose is to soak up energy, not specifically from seventeen-to-twenty-eight-year-old beautiful women, but from everything and everywhere. H-Bombs don't hurt it, bullets ping harmlessly off its hide, and there seems nothing to do but watch as it drains the energy from Earth. But the monster has not reckoned with our hero's ingenuity. At the last moment, when conditions are really getting sticky, Prof. Morrow snaps his fingers, cries, "Reverse polarity! That's the ticket!" and applies the Eppleman, or Appleman, theory. It works like a charm: the Menace from Another World literally eats itself up. It makes a pretty scene, but you can't help thinking that it would have been a lot easier if they'd simply tipped the big brute over in the first reel.

Of SHE DEVIL (UA) I can say very little, owing to the fact that I was afflicted with a recurrence of an old Army complaint (weariness of the eyelids, followed by temporary blackout) after the first ten minutes, and did not recover until a box of buttered popcorn was dropped on my head by a fleeing patron. The only thing I can remember with any clarity is Albert Dekker's advising Jack Kelly that perhaps the two of them were not saving a girl's life but, rather, creating a monster, and that there were certain things best left alone by mere scientists. The monster in question, by the way, is a lovely starlet named Mari Blanchard. She used to be with Universal-International but quit because they were always putting her in silly science fiction movies.

NOT OF THIS EARTH and ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS (Allied Artists Release), both produced and directed by Roger Corman, and written by C. B. Griffith and

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Mark Hanna, are about what you'd expect. The first is an occasionally diverting melodrama about a space fiend who is here to collect blood; the second is an attempt to persuade us that there is something terrifying about a fat, clumsy crab. There isn't.

Incidentally, if you retain vague and pleasant memories of SON OF KONG and have an opportunity to see it on television, don't. Like most sequels, it is a dreadful flop, with none of the magic that still clings to the original. Baby Kong is played for laughs: he behaves like an unbalanced ancestor of J. Fred Muggs, but I can't see anything remotely charming about a twelve-foot-tall gorilla.

During the past year and a half, Richard Matheson has written three motion pictures. All three—THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN, THE FANTASTIC LITTLE GIRL and GUILLIVER'S TRAVELS—concern the problems of people who are no larger than a walnut. Matheson was beginning, with some justification, I think, to wonder if he'd fallen into the oddest rut in Hollywood and would end up working hand puppets at some Little Theater. Then Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., called him and offered him a chance to do a western fantasy, with normal-size people. I understand Matheson is insisting on a 7'3" hero who has to duck his head to get through doorways.

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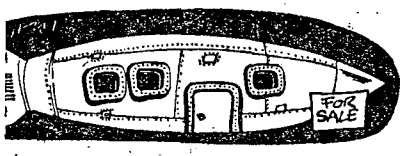

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Robert M. Coates, art critic of The New Yorker, *has distinguished himself not only in "mainstream" fiction but particularly in the specialized fields of crime and fantasy. As terrifying studies in psychopathic criminality, his short story* The Fury *and his novel* WISTERIA COTTAGE (*reprinted as* THE NIGHT BEFORE DYING) *have yet to be surpassed; among his highly skilled fantasies, you may remember* Return of the Gods (*F&SF, Winter-Spring, 1950*) *or, from their anthology appearances,* The Law *and* The Hour after Westerly. *Here is a Coates story new to the science-fantasy market: an ironic note on the nature, function, advantages and disasters of extrasensory eavesdropping.*

A Parable of Love

by ROBERT M. COATES

WALTER KETTRICK, DESPITE HIS LITERARY background, was a thoroughly practical fellow (like all truly great innovators, he was also almost certainly a little mad), and when he discovered the strange capacity he had, one of his first thoughts was of ways by which he could turn it to profitable use. The gift was not something that was born in him suddenly; indeed, the fact that it took so long to develop was to him the surest proof that it was not some magical function but an innate, though generally disregarded, property of all mankind. His triumph was that, as far as he knew, he was the first to isolate it, analyze it, and exploit it.

Kettrick was an instructor of English at a small school for boys in Massachusetts then, and although he was bored almost to frenzy at the time, it struck him later that it was perhaps the most fortunate position he could have found himself in; for his boredom made him restless, and thus open even to the wildest notions, while the very immaturity and innocence of the young minds he was forced to cope with made them ideal subjects for his beginning experiments. Oddly, too, considering its final outcome, the whole thing began as a joke—or so Kettrick, at least, considered it. If the objects of it were not always of the same opin-

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ion, this did not bother him greatly. The truth is that Kettrick was not an admirable person. He was mean, he was grasping, he was overbearing; and although he had learned to keep these baser qualities decently concealed when it was politic to do so, they came readily enough to the surface when his audience was only the more or less captive one of a dozen or so schoolboys.

The joke was one that has been long familiar in classrooms, though Kettrick elaborated it more than most. "*Hush!*" he'd cry when some luckless scholar stood tongue-tied after being called on for recitation, and then he would wave both hands portentously. "I can almost . . . you know; yes, now I *can!* I can hear Johnny thinking! Silence, silence, now, everyone . . ." He would tilt his head to one side as if to listen more carefully. "Oh, yes, now it's coming in clearly indeed. 'Oh, why didn't I study this, study this darned old passage last night,' he's thinking, ' 'stead of reading those darned comic books? Might have known the old—' What was that last word, Johnny? I didn't quite hear it. No, don't tell me!" And smiling icily, he would raise his hand. "Let me see if I can hear it myself . . . Quiet, everyone, *please* . . . Yes, yes, there it is again . . . Only, now— Now it's all getting fainter and, well, sort of wandering. Johnny's mind does wander, we all know, and now his thoughts are a sort of mishmash, a mixture. There is something about somebody 'picking on him'—who, I wonder, can that be?" So, mercilessly, while the boy stood red-faced with embarrassment and the rest of the class tittered uneasily, he would pillory his poor victim.

The boys' minds, in their guilelessness, were so close to utter transparency that he could almost invariably anticipate their thoughts —"reading," so to speak, the true transcript of what went on in their little intelligences as they mouthed their excuses for delays, errors, and classroom failures, or their seekings for privileges of one sort or another. And, he asked himself, if one could "read" them, why couldn't one "hear" them, too?

To be sure, he knew well enough that there was an extension of meanings here. More than two separate senses of perception were involved. When people talked of "reading one's thoughts" they were speaking metaphorically, and what they generally meant was that by the observation of a number of actual, visible factors—gestures, facial expressions, and so on—they were able to "interpret" the thoughts or intentions that lay behind them.

Yet he knew, too, that there had been many recorded instances of men's minds doing more than that. At one time, he'd been deeply interested by the experiments of Dr. Rhine and others in the phenome-

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non called Extrasensory Perception. Surely, there, with their areas of communication limited to a few simple cards, and their rigidly controlled methods of employing them, these men had reduced the factor of "interpretation" more or less to the point of nonexistence—and yet there, and despite these restrictions, results had been obtained that could only be explained as the product of some intentional, meaningful contact between two minds.

It was a form of communication too delicate, it seemed to Kettrick, to be properly called "reading," and the term was used, obviously, only because the eyes were the medium employed. Here, however, he felt, the wall between metaphor and actuality became thin indeed, and so he was brought back again to his original question: If the eyes may be used in this way (as a medium only), then why not the ears—or, to put the problem more precisely, why not use the system of neural, physical, and other responses that produce the phenomenon of hearing, instead of those others, intrinsically no more sensitive, involving that of sight?

The more he thought about it, the more the whole problem fascinated him. As he pondered it, still other approaches to the matter opened up before him; and though he owed his final success to no single one of them, they all contributed a little, in one way or another, to the outcome. Hypnotism, for instance: Hadn't it been proved scientifically that an expert hypnotist could "project" a thought or command into a sleeping subject's mind—though at the same time a pistol shot would go completely unnoticed by that very person? And if this was so, then, by simply reversing the process, mightn't it be possible—in conjunction, perhaps, with some form of self-hypnosis—to "induce" the thoughts of another person into one's own brain?

Kettrick's experiments in that direction were, in the main, inconclusive; and so—for lack of dependable information, principally—were his attempts to imitate the procedures of the Hindu mystics, some of whom are reputed to be able to transmit not only their thoughts through space but their very bodies as well. Yet though these attempts were failures, he felt later that he had profited from them—learning from the mystics detachment, and from his efforts at self-hypnosis a kind of "focusing" of the mind that he eventually discovered was absolutely essential.

He was learning, yes, slowly but surely, and mainly—as must always be the case with venturers into untrodden fields—by trial and error; yet when success came, it seemed to come suddenly. Certainly, he was not prepared for the bursting feeling of triumphant accomplishment, of almost godlike

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discernment and power, that came with it.

He had lost his job at the school by then (some nonsense about one of the boys complaining that "Mr. Kettrick was trying to hypnotize me"), and there had been other, subsequent difficulties—not about his livelihood, for he had a little nest egg and, in any case, soon found a post as a junior editor at a publishing firm in New York, but about the matter of finding subjects for his researches—and he was involved in one nasty incident with a man in a bar on Eighth Avenue, and another with a woman in the subway (this one almost leading to his arrest) before he learned to camouflage his activities more adroitly. (Ironically, he discovered later that one didn't have to stare at the subject at all; it was better, in fact, to "place" the vision on some other object and then "black it out" or forget about it.)

But, in recompense, there had been fleeting instances when he felt that he had almost succeeded—once, even, at school, in the concentrated quiet of a study period, when he had heard a strange, sourceless buzzing, as of the hum of many muted voices, in the air around him; and again, once or twice, in the city, at similar moments of isolation and calm—and it was these, tantalizing and inconclusive though they were, that had encouraged him to go on. They were as nothing, though, to that first time when he really "heard."

He was standing at a bus stop, and since the moment, in a sense, was historic, it might be stated definitely that it was at the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 12th Street. It was in the fall of 1953. The day was cool but sunny, the air calm, and the region, at that morning hour, fairly quiet; and standing beside him at the curbing was another man—brown-suited, chunkily built, with a square face and rather heavy features—who was obviously waiting for the uptown bus, too. It was one of those temporary pairings of purpose that occur so often in the city and are so generally disregarded—the sharings of elevators or of bus seats, the pacings for a few steps side by side through the crowds—and since Kettrick had already divined that their atmosphere would be especially fruitful for his objectives, he prepared almost automatically for practice.

He "placed" his gaze (as it happened, on the railing around the churchyard across the way) and then deliberately "blacked" it. He dispelled his own thoughts and focused his attention; he had achieved detachment, and now, reaching down almost physically inside him, he sought, firmly and steadily, for concentration. And now, this time—yes, this time, *now*, there was no mistaking it! Look-

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ing back on the experience, Kettrick realized that he had felt a new force surging up within him (he could only describe it as a positive "will to hear"), but at the moment he was too busy maintaining the proper balance of his forces to analyze them: all he knew at the moment was that he actually "heard."

For suddenly, not so much over or under the other noises of the street as eerily apart from them, as if in some totally different tonal register, a new sound had asserted itself. It was partly a mumble and partly a sort of low, uncertain humming, and as it flowed from the man to Kettrick, words—mostly disconnected but at times so jammed together that they overrode each other; at times, too, forming sentences—floated, as it were, upon it. It flowed so swiftly that it was impossible for Kettrick to record it fully, and there were moments when, in his excitement, he lost control of his perceptions and so lost reception as well: moments, too, when (inexplicably to him, at that stage) it died away entirely.

"Buttery-yellow," he heard, in the midst of the steady humming, "and the brown yellow sunny brick warming yes but who goes now? All the mumbly jumbling dim big empty and then on Sundays the mumbo-jumbo ought to tear them all down and parks maybe Hmmmm nice softoily taste though and the eggs onlyyellowscrambled crispcrackly too the"—and then, sudden as an interruption, clearly, a whole sentence, sharply enunciated: "You're just spoiled, damn you, just plain spoiled! So I told her yesbyJesus I told her and well weeps of course and the blue oh why can't you of course nice of course yes be nice" There was a long pause, in which even the humming died away at times, and Kettrick caught only a scattering of words: "Feelings yeah yeah oh sure whose though?" This was followed by another series of sentences: "All right then all *right* But damn it I've got a temper too always had can I help it if I So well well anyway a fine way to start out in the morning phone maybe later."

Then, apparently (and the bus was by now approaching), he glanced at Kettrick: "Young squirt pushy type looking probably too wife? troubles? doubt it too young cagey too on yourmarkreadysetgo type and the stiff-collar neatflannelsuit but no guts I'll bet no reason of course lots of seats still down here but just for the hell of it bet if I simply step forward stand aside boy attitude shouldering "

The bus pulled up and as the man lunged for the entrance, Kettrick, with an irony that was lost on the other, stepped back a pace politely and waved the man aboard ahead of him.

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He said nothing then, though he was sorely tempted. But later, when he rose to get off at Forty-sixth Street, he did, to someone else. As the bus filled, he had acquired as his seat companion a plumpish man, middle-aged, in a rumpled gray suit, and throughout the latter part of the ride the fellow had sat hunched forward in his seat, the thumb of one hand rubbing the knuckles of the other as he held them clasped in his lap. Deep as he was in his thoughts—or perhaps because of that—they came over as clear as a bell.

"Or just come right out with it," he was thinking when Kettrick "tuned in" on him, and again the words were carried on that eerie, uneven humming: "'Frank you know as well as I do how prices have gone up in the five years I've been here and yet in all that time—'" Momentarily, his thoughts veered; he may have glanced at the cloth of Kettrick's trouser leg or of someone else's, for the next thing that emerged was: "Good material all right he worry? I bet not good pay good clothes yes that maybe—" Abruptly, he went back to his main theme again: "'Good clothes means good pay, Frank. If you want to sell right I got to dress right, or else' no no hell no not that maybe better be casual meet him yes maybe right in the corridor and 'Look Frank got a minute?' and 'I been meaning to bring this up before but now honestly Frank don't you think it's about time I' ?' But suppose he—" There was a pause, and this time the humming was intensified. "That damned laugh of his!" the man burst out next, or his mind did, and then, to himself or to his ghostly interlocutor: "Either I'm worth my salt or I'm not, and I might as well find out right now!" And then, trailing off again: "Oh I could of course sure find something but or wait maybe when the spring line's all ready and busy and dirty trick of course but but no friendships in business." Then, suddenly, "'You can't live on friendship, Frank. You can't pay the rent on it . . .'"

So it went, monotonously, and when Kettrick got up, he paused a moment when he'd reached the aisle and tapped the poor man on the shoulder (he just couldn't resist the temptation). "I'd try the 'worth my salt' approach myself if I were you, old fellow," he said as the man glanced up. "Direct action's the best, every time, and I'm sure Frank himself would agree with me." Then, leaving the fellow gaping in purest amazement, he stepped briskly to the exit door and got off.

Kettrick didn't go to work that day; he couldn't. Instead, he spent the major part of it just moving about in the city, walking, pausing, "listening"—glorying in his new capacity and his own increasing ease in it. Like the beginning swim-

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mer who at one moment seems to be lost in an element so alien to him that it is unmanageable, and at the same time to be called on for skills that are obviously beyond his providing—and who, yet, once the moment of "learning" has passed, finds the skills that he'd lacked before suddenly, simply, *there,* the element familiar and tractable—so Kettrick, as that day and the following days progressed, found his skills and his own sureness in them increasing with an almost bewildering rapidity.

Some things for a while still eluded him. At the start, it was only in such more or less isolated pairings as he'd found himself in that first morning that he was able to make effective contacts. In more complicated situations—singling some one person out in a restaurant, say, or in a group on the sidewalk—all he'd get, confusingly, was a babble of "voices." But eventually, by a further development of his powers of focusing, he was able to single the one out from the many. For reasons that he could never be quite sure of—though he figured that it must have something to do with the emotional rapport—some people made much better subjects than others, while there were a few each day (their numbers diminishing, however, as his proficiency increased) with whom contact seemed totally impossible.

But he discovered, on the other hand, that there were many who for long, unpredictable periods almost literally did not "think" at all; and at such times that thin humming which was the murmuring of the mind dropped so low that it was almost inaudible, while such words as it carried came so scatteredly and so faintly (mere ghosts of words, really) that it was next to impossible to distinguish them.

Syntax, too, for a time was a problem. For the mind, Kettrick discovered, when communing only with itself, has its own grammar. As in Latin, the relation between words is established by other means than their placing in the sentence: in the mind, he found, the strongest impressions come first, often mixed with what seem to be parenthetical interjections, and it was some time before Kettrick, finally realizing this, was able to "receive" such a jumble as "green whiskering and wind (whisking now) now brown splinterlike peering the (here and there peering the) hold so much weight still too but thin the branches and now dingle-dangle the dangling," and understand (he was sitting on a bench in Bryant Park at the time) that the man beside him was merely observing a tree as it moved in the breeze.

Once, in a taxi, Kettrick rode behind a driver who spent most of the ride musing, rather improbably, about a plate of cold lobster—

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and so succulently that Kettrick found himself ordering the same dish for his luncheon, a little later. And though a good share of the thoughts he heard were frankly boring—the women's being mainly mere reflections of their own reflections in shopwindows, the men's a round of jobs, money, and girls—there were other times when they carried him suddenly, unexpectedly, deep into the vagaries of another human being's nature.

Sitting in the subway behind a thin but rather pretty young blonde, he overheard such a stuttering tangle of words like "decks," "junk," "cool me," "needle," and so on that it was only accidentally he discovered she was a dope addict, anguishing for a "shot." Again, he heard a man pondering how to tell his wife he had heart disease; and another time, in a Schrafft's restaurant, he sat at the next table to a man, neatly dressed, eating chicken salad and to all appearances sane, who was composing a letter to President Eisenhower—its object being to urge him to have the Pentagon torn down and replaced by another structure of hexagonal shape. There were some passages in the letter, apparently not completely formulated in the man's mind, that he skipped through in a hasty mumble, but his general intent was clear and the final sentences came out ringingly. "I have been rebuffed elsewhere, for I have many enemies," they ran. Mentally, he was almost declaiming them. "But I feel sure that you, sir, will see the wisdom of my plan and will give it more attention. Five, sir, being uneven, is inherently weak and unstable. How, then, can we hope to see our military affairs prosper in such an edifice? I sometimes wonder if there was not treachery involved even in its planning. Our Six, on the other hand, is strong, well balanced, solid as a fortress, secure from any angle, and in every way the real right place for our Army to have its headquarters. Mr. President, I hope you will agree with me: Let our motto be, 'Down the Pentagon, up the Hexagon.' Only then can our nation rest secure."

Kettrick, watching fascinated, saw the man pause in his eating for a moment and gaze out across the dining room. "Hmmmmmm," his mind went, humming as he mused. "Good 'solid as a fortress' yes good oh I'll get you yet you beggars you think you'll get me but it'll be I that gets you!" With a quiet smile, he bent again to his chicken salad and recommenced eating.

Once, too, standing in a bar, Kettrick heard a man, quietly sipping a scotch-and-soda, as quietly planning a murder. It was not a tough bar, either; it was in fact one of the better hotel bars in the Times Square area, and the man, though his features were coarse and heavy and his eyes hard, was uncommon-

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ly well groomed and prosperous-looking.

Kettrick, before this, had come upon a man strolling on upper Lexington Avenue who seemed to be preoccupied with thoughts of death—until he discovered, a few seconds later, that the man was actually playing a sort of impromptu word game, trying to think of all the clichés and other set phrases involving the word which might be used as detective-story titles. "The Death of Him, At Death's Door, Till Death Do Us Part, Unto Death"—so he went, and then, switching his ground a little—"Dead to Rights, Dead Center, Dead Game, Dead to the World," and so on. Whether the man was an author, looking for new subject matter, or had just passed a bookstore window, Kettrick never knew; but that time, again, he was able to deploy a small bit of personal magic, for as the man reached a corner Kettrick hastened his pace a little to overtake him and said, "Here's one you left out—'Death and Taxes,'" and moved on quickly.

So, at first, in the bar, Kettrick thought he was up against some mental play or other. But only briefly; he was not long in realizing that this was in earnest, and he listened with horror and fascination while the man planned in sinister detail how a rival (called "Hammerhead") was to be lured to a restaurant called Petruccio's (down on Carmine Street, in the Village) ostensibly for a friendly dinner, killed, and then his body would be dumped at the corner of 150th Street and Convent Avenue—as a lesson, apparently, to someone called "The Painter" and his following.

Once or twice, the man glanced at Kettrick, looking him over with a gaze so remote, emotionless, and assured that it chilled him to the bone, and set him wondering for the first time if others could exercise the same gift that he had—and if, specifically, while he was hearing the other man's thoughts the other might not be hearing *his*. But he got out and away, when he decently could, without difficulty, and the truth was that, ultimately, he was more intrigued than repelled by the incident. Kettrick, as has been said, was not wholly an admirable man, and his new-found faculty was contributing to the development of the worst, rather than the best, side of his nature.

A feeling almost of godhead was growing in him. Being more and more on the "inside" of men's secret concerns, he was beginning to feel more and more superior to them; and when he came upon an item in the papers a few days later, recording the finding of Hammerhead's body (the fellow's real name, it seemed, had been Benny La-Placata, and he was believed to have been engaged in the numbers racket), it was with something like

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exultation that he read the gruesomely corroborative, brutal details. It struck him then that, if proof had been needed, this was the surest evidence he could ever have wished for of both the accuracy and the efficacy of his talent.

There were problems still to be solved, of course. Kettrick somehow had assumed that with the development of his talent, wealth would come almost automatically; all he'd have to do, he had figured, was to tune in on the mind of some wealthy trader and then follow his inmost decisions. But he found such happy circumstances hard to come by, while the vagueness of such musings of this sort as he did overhear made it equally difficult for him to assess their dependability. His own capital, too, was scant enough to make him chary of making mistakes, and it was not till one evening at the Harvard Club, listening in on the conversation of two men chatting in one corner of the quiet lounge, that he got what he decided was truly reliable information.

The men, former classmates and now both in their fifties, had apparently met at the Club casually, and one of them, a Massachusetts broker called Coby (Kettrick never did get the rest of it; the other, though, was named Bartley Pruitt), was trying desperately to discover if there was any truth, and if so, how much, in some rumors that had reached the East about a big uranium strike on the other's already fairly valuable oil holdings in Oklahoma. He was doing it with the utmost indirection, however, for though the two had been classmates they had never really been friends. The Easterner had been too far above the other socially for that—which had rankled—and now Bart Pruitt, the Westerner, while chatting amiably enough on the surface, was in fact watching with malicious amusement, to see whether the other would humble himself and come out with the question, or not.

"Go on ask me you stinkin' little codfish-eater you Ask me," he was thinking, with such force of emotion that the words came as clearly to Kettrick's mind as if he had heard them spoken. "See what answer you'll get. And the funny thing is you could use the money too now couldn't you?" Then his thoughts drifted off, less consecutively, to recollections of some girl named Betty Winthrop, and an after-game party at the Copley, where Coby, apparently, had "pulled his rank" on him.

"J'evah heah anything of that girl named—well, what *was* her name anyways, now? Betty? Betty something? D'you know, Coby, boy? Anyways, the one we was both so gone on back there, for a while?" he was asking aloud now, and apparently idly. "You jus' snaked her right out from under

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my nose, like, one night at one of them hotel dances. Lord sakes, if I'd been packin' a gun then, I'd a shot you, sure!" And though the other man laughed as uproariously, almost, as Pruitt at the recollection, he knew then (and Kettrick knew through him) that, old classmates or not, he was not going to get his information.

Kettrick did. Texahoma Oil ("My own li'l honey baby, Texahoma") was the name of the company concerned. The uranium was there, in spectacular quantities, and though the stock now stood only at around nine and a quarter a share, that was partly owing to some clever manipulation on Pruitt's part, and one reason he was in town at the moment was to superintend the corralling of as many of the outstanding shares as he could before the news broke and the inevitable rise began.

Kettrick made about twenty thousand dollars on that one deal, for he sank all he could scrape together in Texahoma, around nine thousand dollars, and the stock more than tripled in the next few months. That, of course, was small potatoes. (Pruitt, it was later estimated, made some three million in the coup.) But, once started, he was not slow in putting his profits to good use, and from then on his rise was rapid indeed—and uneventful till the moment when he fell in love.

He was rich by that time: rich, at least, in the modern meaning that he was living up to (and occasionally beyond) an ever-increasing income. He had long ago given up his job; he was living in an elaborate penthouse apartment, and —since he'd shrewdly decided that the only way to make money was to be among money-making men —he was entertaining lavishly. At the parties he gave there, one might meet anyone from a building contractor in Pittsburgh to a big operator in the Chicago wheat pit.

To be sure, there was a hectic side to this society. It was a world of quick deals and quick profits, made not always by means of the utmost legality, and of sharp and sudden changes of fortune, too. But it was a world in which Kettrick could function with the greatest efficiency, and people noted, and marveled at, the almost magical way he could "smell out" a deal when it was still in the making, "move in on it," and somehow wangle a share of the profits. "He's got a nose for money," his friends often said ("ears," he felt like adding, in correction) and he soon achieved something of the status of a young financial genius in the group he now moved in.

The only trouble was that, in the end, it bored him. It was a world, too, of men who liked to boast that they took their pleasures hard, and their pleasures, he found, all ran to a rather monotonous pattern of girls, gambling, and liquor. To

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be sure, the girls, ranging from photographers' models to figures in what used to be called café society, were glamorous creatures indeed, and perhaps largely because of his financial prowess Kettrick found himself more popular with them than he'd ever have dreamed possible before. But drinking he had never much liked, and from the very nature of things he could win at the gambling literally whenever he wanted, and had indeed to remind himself to lose often enough to avoid suspicion. It all left him feeling oddly restless and dissatisfied. Even the minds of the men seemed scarcely worth probing, while the women's ran their own petty round of clothes, scandal, and jealous maneuvering. It was quite probably because of his mounting boredom, he thought later—and by that time ruefully—that he fell in love.

The girl's name was Helen Wilson, and he went into the affair with his eyes—and his ears as well—wide open. She was an actress of sorts, just graduated from television to a small part in a comedy of, unfortunately, none too certain tenure. But she was ambitious, which he liked, for he thought he could convert that to his own ends; and though she was neither the prettiest nor the cleverest of the girls he now knew, he decided he liked that, too. For one thing, he was a little tired by now of glamor for its own sake, while she had a certain calm simplicity of mind, a little wandering way of tying her thoughts together—plaiting them, really, slowly, placidly as a child—that always delighted him. And there was a softness about her almost-too-wide, too high-cheekboned face that—well, he liked her.

He met her first at Sardi's, at a large, rather random cocktail party for the "launching" of something or other—a perfume, as he remembered it—and she seemed at once out of place and yet curiously composed in the gathering. "Kind of kiddish," she thought: he, of course, could hear her. "Kidding kiddish and cocksure and unsure sure but kind maybe and right now of course (knows too I must've heard of him) riding high wide and well not handsome either but but you can't really judge a man that way. . . ." But he was never very worried on that score; he felt from the first that if he wanted Helen, he could have her. For Kettrick, in his own conception at least, was being at his most godlike at that period, and it seemed to him that knowing the girl's thoughts and desires as soon, almost, as she knew them herself—truly, deeply understanding her—well, he thought, really, how could he lose? The one thing that he overlooked, perhaps, was that sometimes even the gods themselves fall in love.

The courtship that ensued was in many respects an unusual one,

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though for the most part it followed Kettrick's plan. No girl, ever, can quite resist a man who seems always to anticipate her inmost wishes, and Kettrick not only knew them but heard them, in detail. "Wish wish oh something cooler opener," she might be thinking, while, aloud, she was agreeing to dinner at "21," and she could hardly fail to be flattered when he whisked her off, surprisingly, out to Coney, instead. He discovered that she preferred him in plainer neckties than the ones he had lately taken to wearing, and he was able both to identify and correct a number of other minor faults, some of which he hadn't even known he had, in much the same manner. Possibly in an effort to rival his business associates in briskness and breeziness, he had acquired a habit of yanking his cigarette from his mouth with a little sucking sound, as he puffed on it—till he heard her saying to herself one day, desperately, "Lord Lord *wish* he wouldn't do that so so vulgar," and did his best to avoid it, forthwith.

Meantime, even her mistakes delighted him. (She had called him "kind," that first meeting, and he knew he wasn't kind; she persisted in interpreting a number of his other attitudes with equal gentleness.) When he won her, and they were married at last, it seemed to Kettrick that he had achieved what was practically an ideal situation. He had a young, pretty wife (and yet not too pretty, for somehow he hadn't wanted that, either; it would diminish his own importance), charming, talented—and whose charms, moreover, he could control, as he could also direct her talents. Or so he thought, anyway, at the time; the fact that things turned out differently is a commentary not only on love and marriage but on human nature in general.

For the fact is that love does not always ennoble, or it does so only to those who are capable of nobility of action to begin with. Mainly, it magnifies, and the man who is mean, jealous, grasping, suspicious, or aggressive—or other such—is likely to have these qualities heightened, rather than diminished, by his new condition. At such times, even love can become a debasing emotion.

And the truth was that Kettrick soon found himself truly in love with Helen—and as this was a factor he hadn't counted on, it was some time before he even realized it. He had known (how could he have avoided knowing it?) that the girl wasn't deeply in love with him. True, she liked him. But for all that, the marriage was for Helen partly one of convenience. Her show was closing, more or less as expected, and she was tired—for the moment—of the grind of the theater; she was at loose ends and,

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like most girls at one period or another of their lives, she felt it "was time" she got married. He had known all that, but he hadn't minded; being cynical himself, he could understand a certain amount of cynicism in others.

Now, however, all that changed. As his love grew, possessiveness, always strong in him, grew along with it, and a feeling almost of resentment that he loved her more than she loved him. For he was grasping, too. He wanted the whole of her, and in an odd way, paradoxically, the fact that he "had" so much of her—her whole mind as well as her body and being—was an added distraction. The very fact that her mind and her motives were so open to him when he was with her made them seem all the more hidden when she was away. What he wanted was her complete devotion, and indeed her almost constant attention, and (jealous, too, and suspicious) he became more and more impatient of anything that barred these from him. By patient probing, he could get an inkling—a reflection, so to speak, mirrored by her mind—of what she had been doing and what she had been thinking during her absences. But Helen, quite naturally, chafed a little under too much questioning; she was puzzled at first and then resentful, and Kettrick found, to his dismay, that when pushed too hard she had a way, womanlike, as he considered it, of shutting off her mind—her real mind, that is—completely from his probings. As the saying goes (and till then Kettrick had never realized the painful truth of it), she gave him only "half her attention," and though her answers to his questions came readily enough, they came superficially, as vague as they were disconnected.

The theater, he came finally to feel, was his main obstacle. Though Kettrick at first had encouraged her—thinking, foolishly, that her success in that field might be an adornment to their career together—he soon changed his mind about that. The trouble was that he couldn't openly disavow his original position, and so, eventually, he began a sort of cat-and-mouse game with her, both encouraging her as she sought out theatrical contacts and at the same time carefully blocking them off from her.

As for Helen herself, all she knew was that something intangible, but odd, was going on around her. She felt "surrounded," as she put it. "Is it marriage, do you suppose?" she asked a girl friend of hers, in a moment of confidence. "This—this—I don't know, this sort of closed-in feeling?" And though she didn't tell Kettrick of this (for they had growing reticences now; suspicion breeds suspicion), the conversation was in her mind, fleetingly, when she came home to him afterward—and she was a little disconcerted when he, misinterpreting her

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thought, ditched a dinner party they had planned and flew her up to the open spaces of Stowe for a weekend of spring skiing, instead.

She had a growing feeling, too, that the fates, or even some more tangible forces, were against her. "You know, sometimes I think someone's down on me, honey," she told Kettrick once, puzzledly. She had just been promised, and then, at the last instant, been refused, a part in a summer stock company on Cape Cod; and though he made all the necessary noises of consolation, there was something that puzzled her about his attitude. It seemed offhand, somehow, or insincere, and she was still more puzzled when, rummaging through his desk in search of a sharpened pencil, she came upon a letter from a real-estate agent in Hyannis, acknowledging the cancellation of the lease of a cottage they had planned to take *if* the job went through—but mailed a day before she herself had learned she had lost it. He explained that easily enough by saying that he'd already begun negotiations for another one. But the fact was, of course, that Kettrick had disposed of the opportunity summarily, by the simple expedient of getting a friend to get a friend to get the job for another actress—as, in fact, he had been able to do on the two or three other times she had seemed on the verge of getting a part.

But that sort of thing could not go on indefinitely, and the climax came when, quite unexpectedly, she got an offer to go out to Hollywood. It was a one-picture offer only, but it carried an option, and the part she was to play, though small, was one she felt she could handle perfectly. She was so pleased and excited about it that she rushed home to tell Kettrick about it immediately. He was sitting in a favorite chair of his—and though he conjured up a smile to meet her enthusiasm, his mind stopped for an instant when he heard what she was saying, before it went on. This, he thought, *this* will be hard to take care of; and then, to his surprise, he heard her mind stop for an instant, too. She was still talking—about the surprise of it, and the accident—"Isn't it funny how so much depends on accidents?"—of running into old Tommy Marshall, whom she hadn't seen since the days at the Cherry Lane, only she'd heard, of course, that he was a big shot now, in Hollywood; and then, gollies, this sudden thing, really out of the blue, about the part, and in a picture that he'd be directing . . . She was talking on still as she had before. But there was, for a moment, a faltering, and in that moment he heard her mind speak, thinly but clearly. "Why why yes yes I hate you," her mind was saying, at first almost startledly and then with a kind of puzzled

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conviction. "I don't know *why* but now suddenly oh, I hate you."

She didn't know what he had been doing, he thought; she couldn't. No one could. But the little inner voice went on, and as he concentrated on it the outer voice grew fainter and fainter—till, when, helplessly, he bowed his head, it died away entirely.

He looked up, and she was gazing at him curiously. "What's the matter, honey?" she was asking. This was the woman he loved, that he could not help loving, and she was looking at him apparently in innocence and candor. "Aren't you pleased? Aren't you interested?" But beneath that the other, smaller voice went on still, inexorably, as he knew it would go on and on in the years to come: " hate you hate you hate you "

Coming Next Month

The feature novelet in our next issue, on the stands around Labor Day, will be *The Chestnut Beads,* the first long science fiction by bright newcomer Jane Roberts, whose debut story *(The Red Wagon)* your letters praised so much. It's a strange and even shocking story of today and tomorrow, of the hidden role that women have played in the past, and the revealed purpose of that role in the future. Fritz Leiber's vividly imaginative *The Big Trek* inspires a striking Emsh cover; and there'll be stories by Richard Matheson and Robert F. Young, both apposite to the season, a lively Hoka novelet by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson, a stimulating article by L. Sprague de Camp on *How to Talk Futurian,* and the revival of an all but forgotten bit of science fiction wit and nonsense by Lewis Carroll.

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A fantasy-footnote, in which the Wonderful Wizard of Weyauwega, Wis., reveals the truth behind that ithyphallic figure of folklore:

The Traveling Salesman

by ROBERT BLOCH

BLACK ART IS THROWING A PARTY, see?

His real name is Arthur Schloggenheimer, but we call him Black Art on account of him being a wizard. Sort of a gag, see, because he is really very serious and raises the dead and all that kind of stuff.

But every once in a while Black Art knocks off from that old black magic and throws a big party. He is a good joe, even though screwy, and he has a lot of liquor so we always come to his brawls.

Well, this time we are sitting around in the big French parlor he calls the Louis 0 Room. Black Art won't allow any mirrors or glassware in his pad, because if he sees his reflection then old John Q. Satan will foreclose his mortgage on him. There is Subconscious Sigmund, the headshrinker, and Floyd Scrilch and a lot of other big wheels, and we are all drinking Pernod out of paper cups and talking about Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade and Howard Hughes and the other characters Black Art knows in the good old days.

I notice Black Art is nervous tonight, and when he gets nervous something always happens. I can always tell. To begin with, his beard usually stands up—like there was a wind blowing on it from across the stars, he says.

Well, tonight his beard is standing up so straight it damn near hits him in the nose. He gets up and walks over to the window, and I can see he is shaking all over. So I sneak across the room and see he is looking out at the moon.

Something flies across the moon. I can make out seven little specks.

"The seven geese!"

I hear him whisper it, and then there is an awful squawk as the birds fly past and the moon goes behind a big, black horned cloud.

"He is coming!" Black Art whispers. "I see the omens!"

Sure enough, a minute later there is a paradiddle on the front door. Everybody looks while Black Art goes and opens it.

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A strange cat comes in.

Now there is nothing really wrong with this guy and the way he dresses. He is tall and thin, and he has big sad eyes—but lots of finks look that way. He wears a set of black threads, plenty dusty, like a burlap bag with lapels. He carries a big bulging suitcase which is also dusty. There is something about the way he wheels in that makes you feel he is real dragged.

Everybody digs it. Here is somebody who travels a long, long way for a long, long time. A little cold wind runs around the room as Black Art closes the door. He looks at the dust on the guy's shoes and at the dust in his eyes.

"I expected you," he says. "I saw the signs."

The stranger sighs like somebody letting air out of his tires.

"Then you know who I am?"

Black Art goes into his educated bit. "When the dogs howl and the seven geese keen mournfully from afar, I know. A man would be stupid indeed not to recognize you for what you are."

"Yes." The cat looks at all of us. "I am the Traveling Salesman."

He sets the suitcase down with a thump and dust flies all over the room. Floyd Scrilch comes up to him.

"What you mean, *the* Traveling Salesman?" he asks. "There's lots of those characters around."

The stranger smiles his tired smile. "Yes. But there's only one Traveling Salesman known all over the world—the Traveling Salesman of the dirty jokes. And that's who I am."

He sits down on the sofa very carefully, like part of him is made of expensive glass which he is afraid of breaking. Black Art hands him a drink and we all stand around.

"Thanks," he says. "It's cool to take five like this. Haven't been in the city for years, you know. Just one damned rural route after another. I go from farm to farm, year in and year out. What an awful life I lead!"

"Yeah?" I say. "What about all those farmers' daughters?"

"Nyaaaa!" yells the Traveling Salesman, real loud. He jumps up like he is being gnawed by mice. "That's all they ask me. What about all those farmers' daughters? I'll tell you what!

"I'm sick of farmers' daughters! I'm sick of farmers. I'm sick of their wives, their rickety farmhouses, their squeaky beds, their outdoor plumbing!"

I shrug. "Then why travel?" I ask him.

"Why?" snarls the Salesman. "Because I'm cursed, that's why. Like the Flying Dutchman and the Wandering Jew."

"Cursed?"

"By men. Men like you. Men who tell stories about the Traveling Salesman. You created me—you and your mass thought

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through the ages. After millions of men, their minds inflamed through telling bawdy tales, had thought about me in groups for hundreds of years—I just *materialized*. All those mass thoughts created a physical being. Me—the Traveling Salesman! And so I am cursed to wander.

"To wander, every night visiting a new farmhouse. Never a change of routine. A greasy supper. A fight over where to sleep. Then to bed. And there's always some damn daughter . . .

"Those daughters! Dumb ones, fat ones, ugly ones—but they all have insomnia. Or cold feet. Or they snore."

The Traveling Salesman begins to groan. We get closer.

"It's my fate to live through the details of every one of those thousands of stories men have invented around my legend. I must engage in a hundred foolish acts, a million excesses. In barns, in haylofts, in horse-stalls, even in cow-pastures. I have been accused, abused, subjected to every indignity by the demands of those lousy jokes. Nyaaaa!"

Everybody looks sympathetic and drinks while he shudders.

"We understand, dad," says Black Art, patting his shoulder. "Why not stay here and rest up for a few days? I'll lend you a pad."

The Salesman gets to his feet. "Thanks," he mumbles, trying to smile. "Mighty nice of you to ask me, but I really can't do it." He sighs. "Some party in Omaha just figured out a new story for me. Something involving a double bed, three daughters and a horse, yet. I have an appointment tomorrow to try it out. So I must grab a train."

He reaches down for his suitcase. Black Art lifts it for him.

"Hey!" he comments. "This is a real heavy drag! What's in this grip?"

The Traveling Salesman blushes. Then he looks sick.

"Bricks," he whispers.

"Bricks?"

The Salesman opens the door and turns around.

"Yes," he snarls. "Bricks! That's the real tragedy of it all. Here I am, one of the best salesmen on the road, and it means nothing. Nothing at all. I might as well carry bricks as anything else.

"Because," he says, and then he begins to scream, "because in all the gawdawful stories about the Traveling Salesman, nobody ever mentions that I *sell* anything!"

Weeping foolishly, the Traveling Salesman closes the door behind him and falls down the stairs.

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It's hard to construct a puzzle so complex that it can't be solved by a games-minded computer engineer; and it's impossible to contrive a plan so well-laid that it can't be disrupted by a tall, leggy blonde with friendly blue eyes.

Rewrite Man

by CHAD OLIVER

"YOUR THROAT IS FULL OF FROG," Barbara Dodson informed her husband. "I can't hear you."

John Dodson toyed briefly with the idea of correcting his wife's phrase, but being an old married man—seven years now—he decided to ignore it. He waggled the newspaper on his lap and said: "There's something funny about this paper."

"Pogo?" Barbara suggested, sipping her coffee.

"You don't follow me. I mean something is *wrong* with this paper."

"It's not the best in the world," Barbara agreed. "Those typos . . ."

John frowned. "Look," he said. "Haven't you noticed that there's never anything *interesting* on the front page like there used to be? Just the UN and Russia and politics and weather. It's the same every night—they don't change anything but the dateline."

"Your coffee's getting cold," Barbara said, sensing that John was off on another inscrutable tangent.

John gave her scant attention. He gripped the paper more firmly, as though determined to choke the truth out of it. "What's become of all the flagpole-sitters and goldfish-swallowers? Isn't Marilyn doing anything these days? Aren't there any more flying saucers? And what's happened to all the sex criminals?"

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," Barbara said, somewhat demurely.

Something scratched insistently at the door.

"Here comes one now," she said. "Let him in, will you?"

John reached over, and by stretching heroically managed to open the door without quite getting up. Their dog, a house-filling German shepherd, padded in solemnly. He tracked garden-dirt with great precision across the living room rug, curled his bulk up at

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Barbara's feet, and went to sleep with an air of relief.

John started to swing the door shut.

"Wait a minute," Barbara said. "Someone's coming."

John brightened. A car crunched up their driveway, stopped, and doors slammed. There were footsteps.

A head with a large smile on it poked itself through the doorway.

"Busy?" a familiar voice boomed.

"Are you kidding?" John asked. "Come on in, Bill, and bring that woman of yours with you."

Bill Wineburg charged into the room, rubbing his hamlike hands together in anticipation. His wife, Sue, a tiny creature of fluff and honey, drifted along in his wake.

Perhaps fifteen minutes were devoted to platitudes of assorted varieties, after which John and Bill settled down to continue their interminable bout of two-handed stud poker. The girls drank coffee, leafed through utopian home-decorating magazines, and chattered he-said-and-then-she-said girl talk.

The dog, Brutus, twitched his ears contentedly.

Along about eleven, just as the game was breaking up for the night, Sue said to Barbara: "Wasn't that *crazy* about Claudette?"

"Claudette?"

"Claudette Cruchette—*you* know, the actress? The one with those perfectly enormous—"

"I remember now. What about her?"

"Didn't you see it? She's entered a *convent*. Isn't that—"

John spun around in his chair, knocking a pile of red chips to the floor. "Where did you hear about that, Sue?" he asked, pointing his index finger like a six-gun.

Somewhat taken aback, Sue waved her tiny hands aimlessly. "In the *paper,* silly. Don't you even *read* it any more?"

John snatched up the crumpled paper, held it out to her. "This paper?"

Sue glanced at the headline—IKE SAYS YES TO UN—and nodded. "What other one is there? It's right there on the front page."

"Show me."

She took the paper curiously, and examined the front page. "That's funny," she said after a moment. "It doesn't seem to be here."

"Maybe it was somewhere else in the paper," Barbara suggested.

Bill shook his head. "Nope. Right there on the front page. Saw it myself."

"There was a picture and everything," Sue said. She thumbed rapidly through the rest of the paper. "I can't understand it. You must have a later edition or something."

"There's only one evening edition," John said.

"Someone's censoring your paper, boy," Bill laughed. "Cutting out all the sexy parts."

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John was not amused.

After Bill and Sue had left, he sat in his chair staring morosely at the paper. Barbara had to remind him twice what time he had to get up the next morning before he would listen to her.

Before he went to bed, he took the paper, folded it carefully, and put it on the shelf in the closet.

"There's something fishy going on around here," John said, switching off the table lamp by the bed.

"Now, now," said Barbara, kissing him goodnight. "I'm sure there's some perfectly simple explanation."

"For instance?"

Silence.

John had a tough time getting to sleep, and his dreams were lulus.

The next day was Dreary Thursday, only a slight improvement over Awful Monday, and John's mind was not on his work. It was a slack period anyhow, with very little for the computer to chew on, and he was able to do his job without too much concentration.

He was by nature an imaginative man, much intrigued by some of the philosophical writings of India, and he was also a mathematician, forever concocting charming games with rules so intricate that no one else could ever fathom enough about them to give him a decent contest. Whenever his work was routine—he ran a small IBM machine for an insurance firm—he often let his mind roam on more interesting topics.

Now that he actually seemed to be involved in something odd, he found it decidedly stimulating.

He watched his associates closely, but saw nothing unusual. They were the same old gang they had always been. When he went out for lunch, he paused several times to lounge in doorways, eying the passing crowd to make certain he wasn't being followed.

Nobody followed him.

His lunch was decidedly ordinary, if somewhat greasier than usual.

Nothing happened in the afternoon.

Another man might have shoved the whole business from his mind, but not John. A fact was a fact. Something was screwy about his paper, and he was fully prepared to wrestle with it the rest of his life if necessary.

These things didn't just happen.

There was a *reason* for everything.

Wasn't there?

He waited impatiently until five o'clock, and then hurried out of the building. It was a lovely September evening, crisp and cool, with the sun putting on a spectacular display of rose and purple as it drifted down below the tops of the big hotels. John walked up to the paper boy on the corner, stared at him suspiciously, and passed him by. He got his car out

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of the lot and deliberately drove in the opposite direction from his home. He tooled the car through heavy traffic out across the bridge into the south end of town. He picked the number five at random, and then proceeded until he came to the fifth drugstore, which was a good way out. He parked his car, went inside, and pulled the fifth newspaper out from under a pile by the cigarette counter. (There was only one evening newspaper in the town.) He tossed the man a nickel and went back to his car.

He didn't read the front page. He just took out his pen and wrote *Drugstore* on the upper right hand corner. The paper absorbed the ink, but it was legible.

Then he went home.

Brutus jumped up on him and tried to lick his face. He started to tell the dog to go fetch the paper, which he saw stuck in the hedge where the route man had thrown it, but changed his mind and retrieved it himself.

Bru hung his head in dismay.

John thumped his way into the house, slamming the door behind him.

Barbara stuck her head out of the kitchen. "Hi," she said.

John muttered something unintelligible. He ripped open his evening paper and spread the front page out on the floor. Then he opened up the copy he had picked up at the drugstore and spread *that* on the floor.

"What in the world are you doing?"

"Ummmmm."

John's eyes flicked rapidly from one front page to the other. He saw it almost at once. He got up and pulled all the blinds and locked the door. He walked decisively into the spare bedroom and found a soft red pencil in his desk. He went back to the papers and outlined two stories, one in each edition. It wasn't easy to draw on the rug, but the lines were clear enough.

"Johnny, what's the *matter?*"

"Look at this, honey."

Barbara dried her hands on her apron and got down beside him.

"Why, that's just crazy," she said after a moment.

"Exactly."

"I'm going to call the paper right this minute. I'm—"

"No. Don't do that. Let's see if we can't figure this thing out."

Barbara stared at the papers. "What is there to figure?"

"As the man said, that is indeed the question."

There was nothing threatening about the two front pages, nothing sinister. It was just that there were two entirely different stories, one in the copy he had picked up at the drugstore, and another one in the copy he had gotten by subscription. Except for the one story, in the lower left hand corner of each paper, the front pages were identical.

The paper that had *Drugstore*

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written on it featured a little yarn with a headline that read: MIAMI BATHING BEAUTY NIPPED BY SHARK. There was a cut of a well-stacked young brunette in a minimal bathing suit, smiling bravely at the carcass of a shark on a sandy beach. The story itself was nothing very sensational, and was probably brewed in the overactive mind of a press agent. The girl had been swimming, the story said, when she had been attacked by a shark. Handsome life guard Bruce Bartholomew, a veteran of the Pacific theater, had just happened to have his rifle handy, and had plugged the shark. (There was no photograph of Mr. Bartholomew.) The girl had stated that she would go on with her swimming, "because swimming means more to me than anything else in the world, and I know Mom and Dad are counting on me."

That was all there was to the story.

In the paper that John had rescued from his hedge, there was no trace of the bathing beauty story. Instead, there was a perfectly innocuous item about fishing on Lake Travis, which was a few miles outside the city limits. The story had no business on the front page, and had been padded with several fillers because it wasn't long enough. The headline was: TRAVIS BASS STILL TAKING LURES.

The story read:

Austin, Sept. 5 (Spl). Local anglers will be glad to learn that the bass in Lake Travis are still hitting fairly well on lures, Mr. Harold X. Rogers announced today. Mr. Rogers stated that several parties had taken boats out from his dock in the morning and afternoon hours, and each boat had returned with three or four bass and several perch.

"The recent spraying to eliminate parasite fish has not harmed the game fishing," Mr. Rogers said. "I can see the bass jumping out there all day long, and this is really one of the prettiest seasons of the year for lake fishing."

One of the bass weighed in at three pounds, and several others were also nice ones. The perch were small.

* * * *

The duckbilled platypus is a mammal but it lays eggs like a chicken. It lives in Australia.

* * * *

The biggest man ever to play football in the United States was Jasper "Moose" McGill, who weighed 450 pounds.

* * * *

"Well?" asked John.

"I don't get it," said Barbara.

"Neither do I. But I'm *going* to, understand?"

Barbara sighed. "We're going to have fish tonight. I hope you don't mind."

John didn't answer her. He got up and rummaged through his

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desk in the bedroom until he found a partly empty scrapbook. (The first twelve pages were taken up with stamps, a hobby he had abandoned.) He got some scissors and glue and went back to the papers on the living room floor.

"There's something funny going on around here," he announced, and began to snip away with a vengeance.

Outside, the wind shifted around to the north, and it began to grow cold.

"Now look," he said, after the fish had been transformed into bones and they were drinking their first cup of after-dinner coffee. "We're intelligent people, and we should be able to figure this thing out."

Barbara, who was not terribly interested, smiled brightly. She was a tall, leggy blonde with friendly blue eyes and a sweet smile that had been known to melt ice cubes at twenty paces. The smile, however, had no perceptible effect on John.

"Someone or something is messing with our newspaper," he said, lighting a cigarette and puffing on it with his I-smoke-but-it's-just-a-habit-I-don't-really-enjoy manner. "You agree with that?"

"Some*thing*? What do you mean by that?"

John waved his cigarette. "How do I know? I'm just trying to include all the possibilities."

"Well." Barbara looked over her shoulder nervously. The wind had died away to a whisper, and it was quiet outside. You could close your eyes and imagine you were all alone in the world. . . .

"OK," John went on, frowning. "We agree. Next question: *Why?* If you yank a story about a bathing beauty out of someone's paper and substitute a story about bass fishing, what are you up to?"

Barbara moaned inwardly. *Why not just call the paper?* she thought. But no, that would be the last thing Johnny would ever do. She felt a warm glow. She loved her man, and wouldn't change him for the world. Still—

"Maybe it's some fishing fanatic," she suggested lamely. "He's starting a private campaign to keep girls out of the water because they spoil the fishing."

John gave her a look of polite contempt. "Let's make the question more general. If you take *any* story out of a man's paper and put in another one, what are you up to?"

Barbara drained her coffee and waited.

John ground out his cigarette. "That's right," he said, as though she had said something. "There are only two basic possibilities. Either you are hiding something from him, cutting out a story you don't want him to read, or else you are trying to tell him something—inserting a story you do want him to read. Now, which is it?"

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"Well," Barbara said, determined to play along, "maybe he's trying to keep all the sexy stories away from you. Doesn't want to arouse your libido or something."

John considered this quite seriously. "Maybe," he said. He smiled a secret smile. "But let's take it from still another angle."

He'll forget all about it in a week, she thought. *But what a week!*

"Why me?" John demanded. "Why single me out? What's so unusual about me?"

"You're different, dear."

"Everyone's different, one way or another. I'm nobody important. I run a little computer, but there's nothing secret about it. I'm twenty-six years old, I've never been in any trouble, I don't have access to any classified information. I fiddled around with psychology in college before I got tired of running rats through mazes. Why me?"

"The Naval Reserve? Radar?"

"Hmmmm. Could be. But I'm not really any expert. It just doesn't figure."

Barbara poured some more coffee and stacked the dishes in the sink. *Suppose there's really something to it. Suppose something's AFTER my Johnny.* She shivered.

"Have you ever heard of Charles Fort?" John asked suddenly.

"No. Where is it?"

John muttered something under his breath. "This isn't solving the problem. There's just one thing to do."

"Which is?"

"I'll keep on getting two copies of the evening paper every night. I'll save them and analyze the differences between them. If this means anything, some pattern is bound to emerge sooner or later. And don't say anything about this to anyone, honey."

"I won't," she assured him sincerely. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to listen to the radio tonight. See if they're censoring that, too." He paused. "Lucky we don't have a TV set. That would really complicate matters."

Barbara turned to the dishes.

John got a notebook and pencil and switched the radio on. The radio was on the kitchen table, where they could listen to it at breakfast time, and it was somewhat temperamental. However, it came on in fine style tonight.

". . . *and scientists continue to urge attention to this problem in the aftermath of the political campaign,*" the radio blared. "*The radioactive fallout from the hydrogen bomb tests constitutes a grave genetic hazard to future generations, and scientists stress the fact that . . .*"

John scribbled away diligently.

Barbara washed off the dishes with a ragged sponge, being as quiet as she could. And, somehow, she was unable to shake off a queer feeling of unease, almost of fear.

There *was* something funny going on.

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If someone's after my Johnny . . .

She broke a plate when she was drying it, which was something she hadn't done in years.

Two weeks passed. The crisp green of September gave way before the slippery yellow of October.

John had established these facts to his own satisfaction:

One, someone (or something) was definitely and systematically altering the front page of his newspaper.

Two, discreet questions revealed that none of his friends were having similar problems.

Three, the interference did not extend to other media of communications. His radio was okay.

Four, there was no discernible pattern to the thing. The stories cut out of his paper were minor items, usually of the human interest type, but that was their only common thread. The new stories, *his* stories, were trivial to the point of incredibility.

Then, on the fourth of October, as he was pasting the usual two clippings in his scrapbook, he hit the jackpot.

"Look at this!" he hollered triumphantly.

"I don't see anything," Barbara said, puzzled.

"Look again. Don't you *see?*"

Dutifully, Barbara read the two stories again.

The first story, the one in the paper that John had surreptitiously bought in a crosstown supermarket, carried the headline: WOLF IN MAN'S CLOTHING JAILED. The story related the curious predatory adventures of one David Elmer Toney, who had been hunting for deer in the Texas hill-country in the vicinity of Kerrville. Mr. Toney had not had much luck when he happened upon a neatly fenced-in field that was snow-white with grazing sheep. Mr. Toney felt an itch in his trigger finger, and he let fly with his rifle. The dauntless marksman downed sixteen sheep before he was disarmed by an apoplectic rancher. "I don't know what came over me," Mr. Toney was quoted as saying. "I guess I just don't like sheep."

There was a photograph of Mr. Toney; he looked reasonably normal.

The second story, from the paper that John was now thinking of as his own special edition, was headlined: AUSTIN MAN LIKES JELLYBEANS.

The story read:

Austin, Oct. 4 (Spl.). Texans may eat beef every day, and some of them may even enjoy a friendly beer or two, but Mr. Harold X. Rogers of Austin practically lives on jellybeans. "I don't know just what it is about them," Mr. Rogers stated, "but I really go for jellybeans. Most days I just skip other foods so I can eat more jellybeans."

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According to Rogers, this habit dates back to his childhood, when he used to carry a sack of jellybeans in his saddlebags while working cattle on his father's West Texas ranch. "Jellybeans don't make you short-winded like cigarettes do," he observed, "and it was hard to roll those old cigarettes in the dust and wind."

Mr. Rogers is convinced that jellybeans are an excellent source of high-energy food, but he confesses that he really eats them "just for the fun of it." He estimates that he consumes five pounds daily.

* * * *

The wombat never eats its young alive, scientists say.

* * * *

Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock was a German poet.

* * * *

John eyed his wife's face expectantly. Then, noting its vacant expression, he threw up his hands in despair. "The name, honey! The name!"

"Klopstock?"

"Not Klopstock! *Rogers.* Harold X. Rogers!"

"So who is Harold X. Rogers?"

"I don't know. But look here." John flipped back through the pages of the scrapbook until he found the first clipping, the one about bass fishing on Lake Travis. "See? Same name: Harold X. Rogers. That time he was operating a boat dock on the lake, and now he's eating jellybeans."

"Maybe that means something significant to *you,* dear, but—"

"It's the first sign of a pattern, that's why it's important. No other name has repeated itself in any of these stories. This is the first instance of a commonality. Suppose this Rogers, whoever he is, is trying to communicate with me . . ."

"Then why not put his name in *all* the stories?"

John frowned. "Good point," he muttered, glancing at his wife in mild surprise. "Well, look at it this way. He doesn't want to make it too easy."

"Why?"

"How do I know? Maybe it's a contest of some kind, or a game, or a test. The real question now is: who is Harold X. Rogers?"

Barbara sighed. "Before you think of something devious, why not try the phone book?"

John snapped his fingers and charged out into the hall. He snatched up the telephone book, flipped it open, and ran his finger down a column. "Rogers, Rogers," he said. "Lots of them. Ah!"

"Find it?"

"Yeah. Harold X. Rogers. Address on Sixth Street—some kind of business address, probably. GReenwood 2-5059."

"Maybe you shouldn't call him, Johnny. I mean, wait until we can find out something . . ."

"Nonsense!" said John, hot on the trail. "This is D-Day, H-Hour."

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He dialed the number, listened a moment, and hung up the receiver.

"What's wrong?"

"Busy."

He waited five minutes, pacing the floor with Brutus padding along behind him, and tried again. "Still busy."

He kept on trying until after midnight, but the number was always busy.

"Just one thing to do," he announced.

"Now, Johnny, you're *not* going down there in the middle of the night, Harold X. Rogers or no Harold X. Rogers!"

John hesitated, then nodded. "Of course not, honey. I'll drop in on him tomorrow during my lunch hour—it's only a few blocks from where I work."

Barbara knew that wild horses couldn't keep her husband away from there the next day, so she just crossed her fingers. "You will be careful, won't you?"

"Sure, baby. I can take care of myself."

Brutus eyed his master dubiously.

Nobody slept much that night, and it seemed that dawn would never come.

For John Dodson, the next morning passed with all the rapidity of a turtle plodding across a field of glue. He worked impatiently, glancing at his watch every few minutes. And he thought: *It's amazing how deep a rut we all get into. Even when something like this turns up, we still check in at work and save adventure for our lunch hour!*

He felt no fear, not even a vague uneasiness. After all, what was there to be afraid of? His sole emotion was eagerness, like a kid on Christmas morning.

John was always attracted to the unusual and the romantic. As a boy, the finding of an arrow point or an old rusty spur had been enough to set him off on day-long fantasies. Growing up, he had discovered, involved a certain hardening of the mental arteries, and it was a genuine thrill, it was *exhilarating,* to be actually mixed up in something different.

Bring on your flying saucer pilots and your men from Mars! Bring on your sinister gang of murderers! Anything to put a bit of spice into living!

Of course, he wasn't really expecting anything of the sort. When he had been younger, he had sought out all the haunted houses for miles around and explored them thoroughly, but the last thing he had figured on running into was a genuine certified ghost.

Well, who was Harold X. Rogers then, and what did he want?

John inclined toward the notion that the whole deal was a test of some sort, perhaps part of a contest. Probably tied in somehow

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with TV; maybe they would give him fifty thousand dollars in nickels, and then he could quit his job and go uranium hunting in Utah. . . .

A buzzer sounded.

Noon.

Time for lunch.

Food was a million miles away from John's mind, for once. He grabbed his topcoat and hurried outside. It was a chilly gray day, with a faint drizzle of rain in the air.

Four blocks down Congress, then five blocks to the left along Sixth Street—

There.

An old, dirty stone building, three stories high, sandwiched in between a noisy beer hall and a cut-rate men's clothing store. He paused a moment, sizing the place up. Juke-box music spilled out of the beer parlor into the wet street:

"Oh I had a gal in San Antone
"She was rustled by ano-ther;
"Now all I do is set and moan
"She's run off with my brother. . . ."

Shivering a little, John stepped inside the doorway and pushed open the reluctant door. He found himself in a dingy hall, with a flight of wooden stairs leading up to the second floor. He mounted the stairs, half expecting them to collapse under his weight, and at the second floor landing he came to another door.

It was an ordinary wooden door, and it had a button in the panel to the right. Underneath the button a small white card was stuck to the wood with a thumbtack. The card read: HAROLD X. ROGERS.

John felt an unreasonable surge of triumph.

He held his breath and listened, but the place was silent as a tomb. The only sound came from the bar next door, where the cowpoke was still lamenting his sibling's perfidy.

He pressed the button.

There was no ring or buzz that he could hear, but a yellow bar of light suddenly appeared under the door. He thought he heard a swelling hum, like an activated dynamo, but it passed quickly.

"Come in!" an excited voice called.

John opened the door and stepped inside. He was in a large, rather barren room. The only substantial piece of furniture in the place was an ancient roll-top desk. Behind the desk stood a short, balding, red-faced man. The man was built on the rotund principle, and had obviously been eating something besides jellybeans.

"Are you Rogers? Harold X. Rogers?"

The man stared at him, the enthusiastic welcome light dying out in his eyes and being replaced by a look of disappointment that he tried heroically to hide.

"I am Rogers," he said in a care-

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ful, precise voice. "Who are *you?*"

"My name is Dodson."

There was no response from Rogers.

"*John* Dodson."

The fat man sat down in a swivel chair behind the desk. He made no attempt to shake hands.

"I figured out your little deal in the paper," John continued doggedly.

"Oh," the man said, *"that."* He waved a plump, well-manicured hand airily, as though the matter was of no consequence whatsoever.

"Yes, *that.*" John was beginning to get annoyed. "Don't you think I'm entitled to some sort of an explanation?"

"Not necessarily." Mr. Rogers folded his hands and leaned back in his chair. He was trying hard to give an impression of boredom, and he might have succeeded except that his hands were trembling violently. . . .

John frowned. There was no way he could force the man to talk. He toyed with the idea of threatening some sort of legal action, but Rogers had promised nothing, there was no obvious intent to defraud—

"Ummmm," said Mr. Rogers, trying to sound casual. "You—er—worked it all out for yourself, is that right?"

John nodded.

"No—ummmm—help from anyone, is that correct?" The man's diction was still oddly precise, as though he were speaking a foreign language.

John shrugged. "I talked it over with my wife."

"She made suggestions, perhaps?"

"One or two, yes," John said, remembering the telephone book. "But I came here to ask *you* the questions."

"Impossible," stated Mr. Rogers flatly. "Quite, quite impossible." He darted a look into the corner of the room, almost as if he expected to see something there. His pink forehead was glistening with sweat.

John glanced into the corner.

There was nothing there.

"Well!" said Mr. Rogers, suddenly getting to his feet. "Must be going!"

"Wait a minute, dammit! You can't—"

Mr. Harold X. Rogers paid no attention. He walked hurriedly to a side door in the room, opened it, stepped inside. Just before the door closed behind him, John caught a glimpse of a large dull gray metal sphere in the room, flickering with tiny flames that reminded him of little lightning flashes.

"Hey!"

Too late. The door was shut. There was a high whine, like the dynamo-sound he had heard before, and then silence.

The lights went out.

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In the darkness, John reached out and tried the door. It wouldn't budge. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his cigarette lighter. He spun the wheel, and on the fifth try he got a light.

Bewildered, he crossed over to the desk, looked at it. There was nothing on the desk. He pulled open the drawers, one by one. In the bottom right drawer, there was a piece of scratch paper. He flattened it out on top of the desk, and held the light down where he could see it.

It was covered with marks. Not writing, he saw instantly. Some kind of formula—

He stared at it more closely. There were lots of brackets and equal signs, and a number of curious squiggles that looked vaguely familiar. One a tiny circle with an arrow on it, another a circle with a plus sign attached. . . .

Of course! They were the astronomical symbols for Mars and Venus. He felt a curious wild excitement. His mind raced ahead, throwing off conjectures and postulates like sparks. Mars and Venus. The closest planets to Earth. Earth was in the middle—

"What the devil," he muttered.

He decided to make a copy of the chart, but before he could get his pencil ready for action his lighter went out. He spun the wheel without results, hammered the treacherous gadget into the palm of his hand without results, and cursed it roundly, also without results.

He groped over to the door by which he had entered and ran his hand over the wall. He found a light switch and flicked it, but the lights refused to come on.

And it was getting late.

He could, of course, take the scrap of paper along with him. John, however, had a healthy respect for the law, and he certainly had no right to rifle Mr. Rogers's desk. He stumbled across the room, replaced the paper in the drawer, and left the place.

The juke box was still blasting out its philosophy of agony from the beer parlor. John glanced at his watch, saw that he only had two minutes left on his lunch hour, and practically sprinted back to work.

He was damp from the rain.

He was hungry.

He was completely baffled.

Who *was* Harold X. Rogers? Why had he gone to all the trouble of doctoring up a man's newspaper, and then been disappointed when the man came to see him? What had Mr. Rogers been afraid of during the interview? What had that strange metal sphere been in the next room? It wasn't any printing press, that was certain.

For that matter, where had Mr. Rogers gone?

And *how?*

And those squiggles, those signs for Mars and Venus . . .

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John tried to ignore the rumblings in his empty stomach and the churnings in his equally empty brain. He did his work methodically until almost four o'clock.

Then, quite suddenly, he dropped what he was doing.

"Tell the Old Man I was taken sick," he hollered to Ben.

He grabbed his coat, ran out of the building, got his car out of the lot, and headed for home.

And, law-abiding citizen or not, he broke some speed regulations getting there.

When he got home, there was already a car parked in his driveway. It was a perfectly ordinary blue sedan, and he had never seen it before. It did not belong to any of his friends, and it had no business being in his driveway.

He knew who had driven it there, however.

John glided to a stop at the curb and got out of the car. He left the door partially open, careful to make no sound. He stepped across the soggy lawn and paused at the front door.

The door was slightly ajar.

He could hear voices in the living room.

One of the voices belonged to his wife, Barbara.

The other one belonged to Harold X. Rogers.

Of course, he thought. *Mr. Rogers was never after me at all. He wanted Barbara. That was why he was so disappointed when I walked into that office of his. He was testing Barbara all the time. He asked me if she had helped me out with the solution, and I didn't deny it. He wants my wife. What for?*

He listened.

"You do not seem to understand, Mrs. Dodson," the man named Rogers was saying in an exasperated tone of voice. The words were not so precise as they had been before; he was slurring them a bit as he got excited. "I am a man from the *future,* I have traveled through *time* to make this contact with you."

Future? Time? What about—

"That's really swell," Barbara said. There was the clink of a coffee cup against a saucer. "I appreciate it, but you should really talk to Johnny about things like that. He's always been interested in crazy theories, and I—"

"No, no, *no.* You are *impossible!* No, I don't mean that. Please, you must forgive me."

"That's quite all right. Johnny says things like that all the time."

"Imbecile! I mean, look. Listen. Attend! I will attempt to explain one more time."

"About this Edgar Vincent Winans of New York? Really, Mr. Rogers, I'm quite happy as I am—"

"Bah. *That is not the point.* Do you care nothing at all for the human race?"

There was silence, as Barbara

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earnestly tried to decide what to do.

"Look. Listen. Attend. You have heard of the hydrogen bomb, I trust?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well! The radiation from the fallouts of these bombs has certain very harmful effects on the germ plasm, on the *genes*. It leads to an increased frequency of mutations—"

Genes. Mutations. Those symbols: one a tiny circle with an arrow on it, another a circle with a plus sign attached. Astronomical signs for Mars and Venus, yes. But also the symbols for male and female in a genetics computation. Those brackets and equal signs. Barbara and Edgar Vincent Winans . . .

"Mr. Rogers, I never discuss politics."

Mr. Rogers said something in a foreign language, paused, and tried again. "My dear Mrs. Dodson. In a few hundred years, in *my* time, these mutations have had serious consequences for the human race as you know it today. In fact, we are faced with *extinction!* A new race of men has come into being—"

"Oh, yes, those supermen you were telling me about."

"They are *not* supermen!" screamed Mr. Harold X. Rogers. He spluttered for a moment, then continued in a relatively normal tone of voice: "They are not supermen. Only different men. They are strong, they are powerful. And they wish to isolate normal men, people like us, for the good of the race! The *arrogance*, the nerve—"

"Now, Mr. Rogers, don't let yourself get all excited."

"Well! We must fight back, we normal men. How, you ask? I will tell you. We must go back in time, we must prevent certain matings before children are born, we must assure other matings which will produce superior *human* beings to aid us in our struggle! If we fail, our race is doomed. *You*, Mrs. Dodson, have a crucial genetic contribution to make to the future! It is *imperative* that you have no children by your present husband. Instead, our computations show that you and Edgar Vincent Winans of New York City—"

"Please, Mr. Rogers! I try to be broad-minded and all that, but you are making it very difficult for me."

"Bah! This ridiculous sex taboo. Look! Listen! Attend! It is a question of *science*, a matter of random assortment and recombination; it has nothing to do with your infantile ideas about sex!"

"I just don't see it that way, I'm afraid."

"Then you refuse?"

"Well, I hate to say no—I always have trouble saying no to people about charity drives and things—"

"Mrs. Dodson, consider! Your decision may mean the obliteration of the human race!"

"Well, I'm really awfully sorry,

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Mr. Rogers, but I really couldn't. I'd like to help you out, really I would, but I love my Johnny and I simply have no interest at all in this Edgar Winans of yours."

"Love! You speak of love at a time like this! Mrs. Dodson, you are a fool, a colossal, stupendous, incredible *fool!*"

"Now look here, Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers! Keep away from me, Mr. Rogers! I'll call Bru—"

John decided that it was time he made his entrance. He took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

"Hold it, Rogers!" he said.

The short fat man with the red face whirled. His face grew even redder. He pointed a trembling finger. "You! Murderer! Race-slayer! Mutant-breeder!"

John spread his hands. "I mean you no harm, Rogers. What you were saying may have been the truth, for all I know. But you can't talk to my wife that way, sir. Get out of my house before I throw you out."

Harold X. Rogers hesitated.

John doubled up his fist, which was of impressive dimensions.

Mr. Rogers spat out something in that foreign language. John could not understand it, but he knew it was no compliment. Then the man from the future stormed out the door, fuming with rage.

"Johnny!" breathed Barbara.

John received his hero's reward, then disentangled himself.

"Baby, I've got to go out again," he said. "You lock all the doors and don't let anyone in until I get back."

"But Johnny—"

"I won't be long, honey. But there's something I just *have* to find out. You see, if that man was telling the truth . . ."

He left her there in the living room, ran outside, and climbed back into his car.

He pulled out into the heavy five o'clock traffic and headed for town as fast as he could go.

Sixth Street was a wet ribbon, reflecting the white headlights of the homeward-bound automobiles in cold, silvered puddles. John made the block three times before he found a parking place.

The dirty stone building was still there, even more gloomy in the damp dusk. The cut-rate men's clothing store was cheerful with warm yellow light, and doing a brisk after-work business. The beer joint was filled with the low murmur of drinking men, and the juke box was moaning:

"Gimme your love, you great big doll,
"I'm hungry for your smile and that ain't all. . . ."

John pushed open the hesitant door and stepped into the unswept hallway. He took the wooden steps two at a time and paused at the second floor landing.

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The thumbtacked white card was still in place: HAROLD X. ROGERS.

Was he too late?

No—he heard sounds from inside, and light showed beneath the wooden door. John pressed the button.

There was no reply, but the noises from the other side of the door increased in volume. Two voices, speaking a strange tongue, and a sound of scuffling—

John opened the door and stepped inside the barren room.

He stopped, staring.

Harold X. Rogers was there all right, but he was in the process of leaving. The red-faced fat man, in fact, was suspended in mid-air, held in the arms of a man who looked like a perfectly proportioned giant.

"You!" screamed Mr. Rogers, kicking his legs futilely.

The other man raised one eyebrow in salute, and smiled in greeting. He was a good seven feet tall, and he was golden. He *glowed*—that was the only word for it.

The giant said nothing to John. He just carted Harold X. Rogers through the side door as though Mr. Rogers were a sack of sawdust.

"They've won!" cried Mr. Rogers as he vanished into the other room. "Murderer! Idiot!"

John watched, but kept his distance. The huge man lifted Mr. Rogers into the dull gray metal sphere and then climbed in after him, waving courteously to John as he disappeared. There was a clank as the portal into the sphere closed. Tiny flames flickered over the surface of the metal.

There was a humming whine, like a dynamo.

The sphere—*wasn't.*

The room was empty.

John shivered in the sudden silence. He felt as if he were in a cave far underground, with tons of rock sealing him off from the sounds of life. Then the hush lifted. He heard the juke box, the squish of tires on the street outside, the call of a newsboy.

He turned and left the room.

He had found out what he needed to know. The man had told the literal truth. He had come out of the future on a mission to save the human race as he knew it. He had set up the test with the newspaper as a check on Barbara's intelligence—even genetics could be misleading at times, and he had to be *sure*. No doubt he had taken the paper back with him into the future to have it altered, or even taken them all at once. Time travel made many things possible. . . .

And he had failed.

Barbara had turned him down.

The delicate balance had tilted the other way.

John got back into his car, and set out for home. He was not depressed at all. In fact, he was elated. He *did* amount to something! He was, in truth, a very important man.

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What had Rogers called him?

"Mutant-breeder."

Why, he and Barbara were going to become two of the most significant parents in history!

Of course, old Homo sapiens was going down the tube in the process.

Well, he thought, *who am I to stand in the way of evolution?*

He drove on home and pulled the car into the driveway. He let himself into his home with his key. He felt mighty good.

When they had finished eating, Barbara yawned at him contentedly.

"I'm certainly glad no one will be fooling with our paper again," she said, folding it back to the comic section. "That funny man gave me the creeps."

John nodded and turned to the dog curled up by the stove.

"Well, Brutus," he said, "how would you like to have an exceptionally interesting little playmate in a year or so?"

Barbara looked up from the comics, eyes wide with delight.

Brutus thumped his tail.

Yes, but . . .

I accept the existence of saucers,
  I concede there's a case
To be made for believing that something's achieving
  The conquest of space;
I find it completely convincing
  Whenever I hear
That creatures from Venus were recently seen as
  A spaceship drew near:
And yet there's a problem remaining
  That baffles me still.
I'm not disagreeing that some superbeing
  Can wander at will
From one universe to another—
  But if it be thus
Why on earth (so to speak) should he bother to seek
  Any contact with *us?*

ANTHONY BRODE

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In a brief story as carefully wrought as a poem—and as evocative—Mr. Van Doren observes four children on a rainy afternoon, and through them conjures up for us an instant of sheer magic.

A Great Deal of Weather

by MARK VAN DOREN

THERE WERE FOUR HOUSES IN THE valley, and in each house there were several children of whom one was the youngest. These four knew each other better than they knew their own families; or they thought they did. Going to school or coming home, and Saturdays, and Sundays, they stayed together like quails, said Hester's father; or like swallows, said Sam's. Harriet's father said a pack of hounds; Theodore's, thieves.

This afternoon, having started from school in the customary formation—the boys ahead, the girls behind—they heard a sudden clap of thunder in the west, over Donaldson Mountain, and called to each other: "It's going to rain!" The rain came at once, as if to prove them right, and they ran to Hester's house, the first one on the way, for shelter from the great warm drops. For it had been a hot day in late spring, and even the clouds that now blackened the sky did not cool the water as it descended on them, smelling of dust collected somewhere between earth and heaven.

Hester's house was the oldest in the valley. It was older than any other house, and older than any barn or shed. Nobody knew when it was built, but nobody doubted its age. The rooms were low; the passages were narrow, with tilting walls; the floors were solid but uneven; and the glass in the small window panes, at least where it had never been broken and replaced, had curious colors in it; also, it was puddled and swirled, and distorted the vision of anybody who looked out.

Hester's mother, wherever she was in the house today, paid no attention to their coming in.

"Here," said Hester, opening a heavy door at the end of the entrance hall, on the left side. "Let's

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go where it won't matter how wet we are."

"I never saw this room," said Harriet.

It was empty, with two wide windows facing Donaldson Mountain across the way.

"We think it used to be a special bedroom," Hester said shaking her clothes out on the floor. The place had a sprinkled look, as if it were about to be swept. "For old people, or people coming late at night."

"No fireplace." Theodore was pulling at a door no wider than he was, and not much taller, opposite the windows. "Looks like one of those old closets next to the chimney stack. Won't open, though."

"I think it *has* been open. I'm not sure," said Hester. "Look, Harriet—the funny glass."

The girls watched in wonder the gray rain streaming down. It was a waterfall, not to be seen through; yet some light penetrated it, finding faint whirlpools in the glass where smoke of lavender mingled with the gray.

"I love rain," said Hester. "I wish it would do it all the time. Indoors and outdoors, there's nothing like hard rain. I could have it coming down forever."

The boys were at the other window, pretending not to listen. But Sam said: "For a steady thing, snow would be better. You never get tired of snow."

Hester came over to him. "*You* don't. You complained last winter because there wasn't enough—I remember. But what if it snowed on forever, night and day? We'd be covered a mile high. Ten miles. A million."

"What if it rained!" Sam pointed to the cascade before him. "All the soil would be washed away. And then the rocks. The ocean would rise—a mile—ten miles—a million. What's the difference how we go under?"

"Stop," said Harriet. "You make it hard to breathe. It is, in here, anyway. Cold, too—these shut rooms. Sunshine is what I'd have—the sun always there—no night, even. I'll take sunshine."

"And wrinkle up like a plum," said Theodore. "We'd have a desert then. Nothing would grow after a while. You'd die of the heat, or go blind. These dark days—I like *them*. I'll take darkness any time. Always cold, always fresh, always easy on the eyes. Night is perfect. If I were choosing, I'd say that."

Harriet shivered, and a moment later sneezed. "How awful! In no time at all we'd be dead, like the moon. Talk of deserts—it would be the worst kind. Cold, and nothing growing. Dark, and nothing knowing where anything else was—any person, any thing. We mustn't talk like this—in here, anyway."

"You're taking cold," said Hester.

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But no one moved.

The door that Theodore had tried—it was open a crack.

Then, noiselessly, it closed again. If Theodore had pulled at it now, he couldn't have budged it.

None of them moved—the four slender persons at the two wide windows, looking out.

But each of them had his wish. There had been a great deal of weather over this house, and something remembered that. Or someone—who could open doors a crack, then close them without sound. Or had the old house settled in its sand, tilting suddenly, then tilting back; letting one door swing, then swing again? But that would hardly explain how it was that the four children stood so long, motionless in their places, looking out. Afterward it seemed long.

The afternoon, thought Theodore, was the blackest he had ever seen. It was only four, but it felt as if the sun had set. There was a certain moment every day—he had often noticed it—a moment when you shouldn't be thinking of night and yet you were. No shadows, but something fell across your face, and across the fields, the houses. A warning, a touch of death in this very finest part of day. But now it was worse than that—or better, really. For he had got to thinking of the moment when the false shadows fell—if they were false—as the best of his secrets. It was something no one else saw; so he kept it to himself. Not even Sam and the girls knew how it came and went. It went, of course; and later on night came. Now it was as if night, coming at four, had come for good. The sun, deciding to set forever, had hurried to do so, and here they all were—Sam, the girls, the whole world—in fresh, cool darkness that would last as long as the wind did which he felt like velvet curtains at his face. Or a velvet dress, of some tall queen perhaps, in whose folds he had run to bury his eyes and forehead. No light anywhere, not even stars, and certainly no moon. An endless desert of darkness. Yet desert was not the word. It was a good place, soft to the touch and full of pleasant noises—rivers running downhill, birds talking sleepily in trees, the slow hours walking gently over grass, horses stamping, trains rumbling far away, and people, people thinking. Not talking or arguing, but thinking; and knowing in the dark—knowing things that by daylight were difficult to know; knowing them easily, and smiling.

Harriet herself was smiling, but not because it was easy to know things in the night. There never would be night again for those like her who had crossed Donaldson Mountain and found the sun stationary in the sky. There it was always ten o'clock. The dew had dried, and shadows were the prop-

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er length—not stretched out, east and west, like graves, but fluttering from you as you walked. They were live things—ribbons, or loose hair—that went where you did, and enjoyed the day. The day was everywhere and always. Each object in the world was visible forever, waiting where it was for you to pass and love it for the warm, clear pleasure it took in being itself. Yet the warmth of this wide-open world did not increase as time went on. Time didn't go on if the sun stood still. The sun stood at just the right angle for you to lift your head and look; a comfortable bend, a happy tilt, and there it was—the everlasting sun, whose shadows played with what it saw. And it saw everything, nor did it tire of this. Harriet missed Hester, Theodore, and Sam; they had not chosen sunshine as she did. Poor Hester—particularly Hester, who hadn't felt cold, nor found it hard to breathe. Poor Hester, wherever she was. Harriet missed them all, and sighed. Yet she was not weary of the sun. Neither were the mountains, lying there like sphinxes half asleep; nor the low houses, nor the trees with their still leaves; nor the endless roads, nor the rivers, nor the gray waves that never moved, faraway on ocean after ocean—seven of them, lying in a chain whose links they were. Seven of them. One, two, three, four—

Sam had long since sunk through fathoms, fathoms, fathoms of soft white. For miles he had walked blissfully, kicking powdery clouds at every step; then he had ceased to go forward. Now, if anything at all was happening, if there was any change from hour to hour, it was that he sank still deeper, like a diver, toward some bottom that his feet would never feel. He knew this and was glad. If it had once been blissful to advance, now he was buried in bliss itself—suspended in it as in his own element. And it *was* his, for he had chosen to be here. Strange that he could breathe. Stranger yet that he wasn't lonely. The others were not with him; no one was with him; the world, in turning white, had lost all features, put away all form. He was with no one but himself, and even he was white. He looked, and there was no reflection of his face in the depths around him.

He looked; and thought he saw something dark at last. Something his own size, struggling to come nearer. It was Hester.

Yet Hester could not come where he was. If she seemed lost, and anxious to be here, no movement that her hands made brought her out of the dark sea in which she floundered. It was a sea like this, yet not the same. Just over there, yet closed away, as by walls of glass. And the glass darkened it. For it was water, not dry snow. It was deep green water, and Hes-

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ter should have drowned. Would she still drown—was that why she made those desperate motions with her hands? Was her mouth opening, as if to cry? You cannot cry in water. Yet there it came, the muffled sound of "Sam! Sam! Sam!"

Hester was shaking him, and the other two were staring at him with startled eyes. Not because of where he was—still was—but because of where they had been. What place was that?

He came to.

"Where was I? What happened?"

"Look," said Hester. It was raining harder than ever. Even she shivered as she touched the streaming window glass. "You must all stay here till it's over. I'll tell Mother."

Even then her mother was throwing open the door from the hall.

"So this is where you are! I heard you come in the house, and then—but why here of all places? This old room. And your clothes"—she felt Harriet's shoulder—"still wet! You should have come in the kitchen. Besides, there's a ghost here. It might have got you."

All four of them, moving toward the door, stopped dead.

She laughed. "At least they say so—in that closet."

"I couldn't open it," said Theodore.

"You tried? They say he holds it shut."

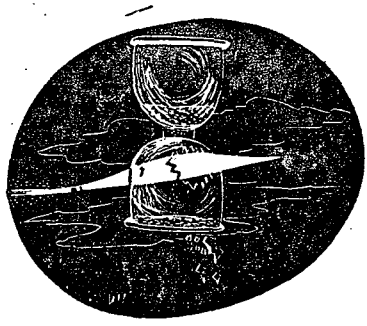
Theodore shook. They all did. It was so cold in here—a warm day, too.

"Come now," said Hester's mother, "and dry yourselves off. Quick! If it doesn't stop, you can stay for supper. Your folks will understand. I've never seen such a storm. Several times it's stopped, and the sun come out. Then rain again. The temperature is dropping, too. If it keeps on, it could snow."

"Hasn't it?" said Sam.

"What a question! You've been here all the time. But hurry now. This rain will wash the world away. And dark! It's only half-past four. Come on!"

They went with her, wondering where they had been.



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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

PERHAPS THE MOST ATTRACTIVE OF all the many aspects of Willy Ley's literary personality is that which he calls the "romantic naturalist." I know that I, at least, have derived even more pleasure from THE LUNGFISH, THE UNICORN AND THE DODO, DRAGONS IN AMBER and SALAMANDERS AND OTHER WONDERS than from all of Mr. Ley's wondrous speculative researches on spaceflight, extra-terrestrial living conditions, mythical geography, military ballistics, the history of science and science-writing, incunabular science fiction or . . . let's see: is there any topic that Ley has *not* written on?

Now at last Ley has a worthy competitor—not in versatility to be sure, but in the engaging field of romantic naturalism. Richard Carrington's MERMAIDS AND MASTODONS (Rinehart, $3.95*) deserves a permanent place on your shelves beside the Ley volumes cited above; covering much the same material, it is comparable to them in scholarship, wit and charm.

The author, a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and of the Royal Geographic Society, gives his volume the fitting subtitle: "a book of natural & unnatural history." It falls into four parts, dealing in turn with legendary animals (mermaid, sea serpent, kraken, dragon, phoenix), whose origins are explained by an ingenious combination of zoology and the psychology of folklore; with extinct animals (particularly the mammoth and the extraordinary chirotherium) and the little-known science of ichnology, the study of "fossilized actions"; with those paradoxes labeled "living fossils" (coelocanth, peripatus, ginkgo and the marsupials and monotremes); and with animals which became extinct within very recent memory (quagga, passenger pigeon, Steller's sea cow) or are at this moment threatened with extinction (the Javan rhinoceros, the Notornis of New Zealand).

Each topic is oddly fascinating, and each is treated with a delightful breadth of culture. (Incidentally, Carrington, like Ley, thinks it probable that the great sea serpent belongs among factual "living fossils" rather than among mythical beasts.) Index and bibliography are exemplary; illustrations, by Maurice Wilson and others, are both pleasing and instructive; and

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the book breathes forth an entrancing sense of "the wonder, the richness and the incredible diversity of life."

Two French journalists, Bernard Busson and Gerard Leroy, attempt to invade the same preserves in THE LAST SECRETS OF THE EARTH (Putnam's, $3.50*), but are simply not up to meeting the standards of Ley or Carrington. The one commendable chapter out of the seven is an exciting piece on recent French researches in the exploration of underground rivers, which demands a startling combination of speleology and skindiving. Essays on flying saucers, the Abominable Snowman, the coelocanth, etc., are superficial rehashes, inadequately researched, speckled with errors and omissions, and hardly worth importing—particularly in so short (less than half the length of MERMAIDS) and overpriced a volume.

We in America have become accustomed to a higher level of science-writing, not only in our best newspapers and general periodicals, but particularly within the field of science fiction; for it is in the science fiction magazines that one can find a great many of the best speculative science fact articles. Aside from a few, like Ley's, that have been reshaped into books, these articles have been too long neglected and unavailable; but at last Martin Greenberg has produced the first sample of a welcome new type of non-fiction anthology in COMING ATTRACTIONS (Gnome, $3.50*).

Most of the articles are, as is meet, from *Astounding,* consistently the best source of imaginative non-fiction; and surprisingly many (7 out of 11) go back to that great flowering of s.f. in the period 1938-1943. One might fear that speculative articles would become rapidly out of date—that factual achievement would catch up with them, or that their concepts would become commonplaces of fiction. But this is not the case; and such stimulating pieces as Willy Ley's *Space War* (1939) or L. Sprague de Camp's *Language for Time Travelers* (1938) are still valuable . . . and sorely needed as correctives to the erroneous clichés of fiction writers (who apparently do not bother to read the non-fiction in their favorite markets). Of the modern pieces, Frederik Pohl's *How to Count on Your Fingers* (1956) is especially estimable as a singularly clear (and amusing) introduction to binary arithmetic. The first anthology of science-nonfiction could, perhaps, have been more cogently patterned and more nearly definitive; but it's a most important pioneering job, highly enjoyable and instructive in itself and (one hopes) the harbinger of many such volumes to come.

Other (to use the word loosely) non-fiction includes Orfeo M. Angelucci's THE SECRET OF THE SAU-

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CERS, edited by Ray Palmer (Amherst, $3*), and M. K. Jessup's THE EXPANDING CASE FOR THE UFO (Citadel, $3.50*). The Angelucci volume is an oddly fascinating one: like Truman Bethurum's ABOARD A FLYING SAUCER, it is a patently honest, sincere account of personal contact with interplanetary visitants—in this case extra-dimensional beings who once inhabited the now-destroyed planet Lucifer. There's a certain awkward charm and a great deal of psychological interest in Angelucci's narrative—if nothing even approaching evidence as to the nature or existence of Unidentified Flying Objects. The Jessup book is almost 100,000 words of "evidence" for the author's contention that UFOs represent "life, and/or intelligence, inhabiting space around us." The book is written in prose of frenetic chaos, devoid of index and bibliography, and apparently printed from uncorrected proofs, so that it is difficult to tell what is error and what is misprint. Its highpoint is reached in the appearance of the one-time Astronomer-Royal of Scotland, Charles Piazzi Smyth, who is not only misspelled but described as "a hard-headed, skeptical analyst." It was Mr. Smyth whose hard-headed analysis of the measurements of the Great Pyramid of Gizeh established that the Second Coming of Christ would occur between 1882 and 1911.

To these saucerian notes should be added the availability in reprint of the most nearly objective and comprehensive work on the subject yet published, Edward J. Ruppelt's THE REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS (Ace, 35¢).

The above-mentioned binarist Frederik Pohl has been the subject of the year's most unexpected s.f. book review. On Sunday, February 17, the Jackson (Miss.) *Clarion-Ledger* and *Daily News* wrote of SLAVE SHIP: "This is the first full-length science fiction novel by Frederik Pohl, whose others have been in collaboration, usually with his wife, C. M. Kornbluth. And it seems to me that he might have done well to keep her by his side."

This is as complex a subconscious error as I have ever met up with, apparently mingling separate streams of association. For A) Henry Kuttner has, of course, almost always enjoyed the collaboration (acknowledged or otherwise) of his wife C. L. Moore; B) Catherine Moore Kuttner has the same initials as Cyril M. Kornbluth; C) Pohl has frequently collaborated with Kornbluth, who has twice collaborated with Judith Merril, who was once married to Pohl. To which one might add D) that collaboration is in so many respects so similar to marriage that the distinction is minimal. (*Mais vive la différence!*)

No matter how he arrived at his conclusion, however, the Missis-

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sippi reviewer was not wrong in feeling that Pohl would do well to keep *someone* by his side—at least as an author. Pohl is an excellent editor (his newest venture, the quarterly magazine *Star Science Fiction,* should appear on the stands some time this month) and an often inspired collaborator; but his solo fiction, as represented in THE CASE AGAINST TOMORROW (Ballantine, 35¢; no hardcover edition) is less distinguished. There are 6 stories here, 2 of them (adding up to almost half the wordage) recently anthologized. You'll find some striking ideas here and some effective writing . . . but rarely in the same story. In view of the number of books which offer neither, the volume deserves your attention; but such ineffectual development of a powerful notion as in *The Candle Lighter* or such entertaining exposition of a slush-pile cliché as in *Wapshot's Demon* indicates Pohl's need for a collaborator, or at least an editor.

The Kornbluth-Merril (and *not* Pohl) collaboration appears in the 1952 novel, GUNNER CADE, by "Cyril Judd," now reprinted (Ace, 35¢)—a competent but derivative job. Star billing must go to the (again collaborative) other half of this Ace double-book: CRISIS IN 2040 by H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire, first book appearance of the short serial which ran in *Astounding* in 1953 as NULL ABC. This is an agreeable combination of extrapolative satire and all-out melodrama, with high marks in each division. Slightly lower marks novelistically: the multitude of characters is confusing and the political maneuvers of the plot hard to follow—but you aren't apt to care too much as you relish the observant malice with which the authors project today's trends into a future of nation-wide illiteracy, in which reading and writing are the property of a despised class of specialized technicians and public schools are deadly nightmares which would shock Evan Hunter. It's a lively specimen of s.f.-as-social-comment, and culminates, for action fans, in as adventurously rousing a pitched battle as you could desire.

You can skip Manly Banister's CONQUEST OF EARTH (Avalon, $2.75*). It starts off as an incredible but mildly entertaining yarn of a secret brotherhood of supermen who plot against the tyrannic invaders from space, but soon gets so foolishly wild and super-super as to lose all contact with the reader and induce only boredom.

A volume of imaginative fiction as unclassifiable as it is rewarding is SOMETIME, NEVER (Ballantine, $2.75*; paper, 35¢), a collection of 3 short novels by William Golding, John Wyndham and Mervyn Peake. In *Envoy Extraordinary,* Golding moves into the past to examine the problems of a Roman emperor with a too-brilliant Greek

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who invents things (steam engines, gunpowder, movable type . . .) out of due time. In *Consider Her Ways,* Wyndham moves into the future (or an alternate thereof) to observe an all-female human society modeled upon that of the ants. And in *Boy in Darkness,* Peake moves into the world of absolute nightmare to relate a symbolic and terrifying experience in the adolescence of Titus Groan (title-hero of Peake's 1946 Gothic novel). None of these novellas has appeared in magazine form; all are admirably conceived and written. Special credit to Wyndham for revivifying an ancient s.f. idea with quiet plausibility, and to Peake for having, quite flatly, created a masterpiece.

Leonard Wibberly is the only contemporary writer I can think of who does not publish within our special field, yet whose novels are invariably fantasies. The latest, with the lovely title of TAKE ME TO YOUR PRESIDENT (Putnam's, $3.50*), is the story of a Man from Mars who summons together the rulers of the world and forces them to create peace through atomic disarmament. Now Mars, in this case, happens to be a minute village in the West Riding of Yorkshire, adjacent to the launching site for Britain's top-secret rockets; and the Martian is a hard-headedly idealistic Yorkshireman trapped into involuntary interplanetary imposture. It's a noble serio-comic situation; and if its development is not quite so entrancingly convincing as that of Wibberley's THE MOUSE THAT ROARED, it's still rich in warmth, humor and good will.

To my own taste, some of the finest current fantasy for adults is being written by Edward Eager in the guise of juvenile stories forbiddingly labeled "8 to 12." I hope you remember 1954's HALF MAGIC; now MAGIC BY THE LAKE (Harcourt, Brace, $2.95*) takes the same wonderful children on another series of stringently logical adventures in magic, rich in unexpected and delightful invention, and recounted in a witty and allusive prose aimed at least as much at adult readers as at children. This is, at its very best, the genuine pure tradition of fantasy—the understanding that magic has its own rigid if paradoxical laws which must be adhered to—which has descended to us from F. Anstey through E. Nesbit, which characterized the work of L. Sprague de Camp and others and which marks (I hope you'll agree) the stories of Poul Anderson and other contributors to F&SF. The trifling fact that Eager, like Nesbit, uses children as his protagonists should keep no adult enthusiast from enjoying this thoroughly captivating volume.

**Books marked with an asterisk may be ordered through F&SF's Readers' Book Service. For details, see page 4.*

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Rachel Maddux's Final Clearance (THE BEST FROM F&SF: SIXTH SERIES) *is, so far as I know, the only story from these pages which has been successfully produced as a one-act play. This latest Maddux does not have such direct theatrical possibilities; but you will understand it best if you are, like me, a theater-goer for whom occasionally the instant before the rise of the curtain is the most indefinably exciting point of the evening.*

Overture and Beginners

by RACHEL MADDUX

"NATURALLY, I FOUND ALL THIS QUITE disturbing," Mr. Mallory said.

"I can well imagine," agreed Doctor Crane. He watched his new patient carefully, taking note of the man's healthy skin, his good muscle tone, the picture marred a little by signs of sleeplessness (though this, Doctor Crane thought, was probably temporary and recent) and the signs of nervousness which, under the circumstances, were unremarkable in view of the man's embarrassment.

"And finally," Mallory continued, "as there did not seem to be any obvious explanation, I was forced into believing either there was something wrong with me, or that a group of strangers had spontaneously conspired against me."

"And you were reluctant to believe in such a conspiracy?"

"Certainly," Mallory answered. "After all, why should they? They had never even seen me before. What reason would they have?"

"Exactly," Doctor Crane agreed, smiling at Mallory. "But tell me, what made you come to me? I'm not a psychiatrist; I'm sure you know that."

"I suppose it was because of Sarton," Mallory said.

"The painter?"

"Yes. I was reluctant, after I had calmed down somewhat, to discuss a thing like this. One hates to appear a fool . . . or worse. But I did mention it to Sarton, simply as a baffling mystery, and it was he who suggested that . . ."

"I understand," Doctor Crane said. "I am a great admirer of his painting. And I'm glad that he did suggest you come to me. Did Sarton happen to mention anything to

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you about the Tuesday meetings that some of us attend?"

"Tuesday meetings? No, I don't recall . . ."

Circumspect, as always, Doctor Crane thought, with satisfaction. You could count on Sarton to keep his head.

"Well, Mr. Mallory, I think, from what you have told me, that you do not need to feel alarm for yourself. It is unusual, I grant you, but it is not unprecedented. I have heard of some rather similar cases and, so far as I know, they weren't accompanied by any progressive deterioration in personality, and usually there is not even a repetition. I'm not prepared to speak with absolute assurance on one interview and I should like to see you soon again."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Mallory said with obvious relief.

"After seeing you further, Mr. Mallory, it might be that in my opinion you should be referred to a psychiatrist. What would your attitude be to that?"

"Well, I don't know," Mallory said. "I suppose I'd take your advice. After all, that's what I asked for."

Perfectly logical, Doctor Crane thought, with satisfaction, as he had expected. "I find," he said, "that this attitude in itself is a very good indication, just as your rejection of the possibility of conspiracy was, even though many indications pointed to it."

"I won't deny," Mallory said, "that I got sore and yelled about a bit and probably I did some fist pounding. But when I cooled off, I had to admit that, as I told you, it didn't seem reasonable that it was all planned and staged. I mean, what for? What would be the purpose? Why, I had never even been in the place before that night."

And rarely had he been in that neighborhood. He had been to call upon an old friend of his father's who was ill and, finding himself far from home at the dinner hour, had stopped in the restaurant. It was an ordinary sort of place, not elaborate enough to be too expensive for him, nor yet so humble but that he might expect a reasonably quiet corner booth and linen on the table. He did find these and ordered the pot roast, which was served, as it had been cooked, in an individual earthenware pot. It gave off a good honest savory odor, undisguised, just as he liked it. But it was quite hot, so he decided to eat the salad first. The dressing had a pleasant tang to it that he could not quite identify, some herb, arresting but delicate . . .

It was then that he saw the girl. She was sitting at the counter, the corner seat, so that she was perhaps eight feet from Mallory with no tables between them. In her left hand she held a book which had a red binding and in her right she held half a sandwich which she would raise toward her mouth and then lower to the plate, but from which she seemed never to take a

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bite. Mallory found his own fork going up and down with the girl's sandwich until his cheated salivary glands demanded attention.

The girl's complete absorption in what she read had an hypnotic effect upon Mallory and he found himself smiling because the girl was smiling. He shook himself and wished that she might change her position a little so—that he could make out the title of the book. It was quite exasperating the way that he could almost but not quite read the title. He devoted himself to the pot roast for a few moments and when he looked again, the girl's face was suffused with sadness. She had put the sandwich back on the plate and was holding the book with both hands as Mallory, feeling swept with the same sadness, watched a slow tear slide down her cheek. She had an extraordinarily mobile face and Mallory, trying to break the spell, opened a Parker House roll a little savagely and was amazed to see there, like a jewel, one of his own tears glistening.

"I just stared at it," Mallory told Doctor Crane. "It seemed to me that it stayed spherical an extraordinary time. And I simply had to know the name of that book. I thought it must be the most wonderful book in the whole world, all absorbing, the way that you are always hoping a book will be."

He changed his position then, squirming about in the booth, trying desperately to make out the title. It was in gold lettering, he could see it now. But from this distance it might be in Arabic or Russian. Certainly he could not read it. He ate the roll with his own tear in it ("feeling rather like a cannibal," he said to Doctor Crane) and finished the pot roast while he considered going over to the girl and asking her the title. But there were people in the other booths now and his progress over to the counter would be conspicuous and misinterpreted. He knew that he could not carry it off without embarrassment and decided against it. The only thing to do was to walk near the counter as he left and hope to be able to read the title.

He was so impatient to find out that he refused dessert and asked only for coffee. He waited for the waitress to finish pouring the coffee, for she blocked his view, and when he had had the first, cautious, temperature-testing sip and put his cup back on the saucer he was already reaching in his pocket for the tip. But when he looked up, the girl was gone.

"I was stunned," he told the doctor. "Absolutely stunned. I simply couldn't let her get away. I never in my life felt such a need for anything. I *had* to know what that book was."

He left his topcoat and hurried to the door, for she couldn't have been gone more than a moment, he thought, and must surely be in sight. But in the street outside there was no sign of her. In fact, there was no

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one on the street at all. He came back into the restaurant and spoke to the cashier.

"Where did she go?" he said.

"Who?"

"That girl. That girl with the book. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't remember any girl."

"But she was right there sitting at the counter. You must have seen her."

"I'm sorry, sir, but at the dinner hour we get pretty busy. . . ."

"But—" Mallory said, and kept on saying it as the waitress appeared holding his check, as someone reminded him of his overcoat, as more and more diners began to turn their heads in an effort to understand the commotion.

"I'm the last person in the world to make a disturbance in a restaurant," Mallory said, "but I couldn't seem to stop. I even demanded that the counter waitress be called and questioned and she swore there had been no girl there."

The manager of the restaurant had come by this time and, with Mallory's own waitress and the cashier, it seemed to him that he was surrounded with people, all trying to placate him, get rid of him, until, thoroughly shaken and angry, he found himself outside on the empty street again.

"Vanished," Mallory said. "She simply vanished. And I can't seem to get over it. At first, of course, I was angry, but one can be in the wrong and get angry, or even be in the right and get angry, and simply write it off. It was the feeling of loss, of irreparable loss, that hung on."

"Tell me, Mr. Mallory," the doctor said, though it was only a formality, for he knew the answer, "what is your work?"

"I am a writer."

"Well, Mr. Mallory, as I said, I don't think you need be unduly alarmed. I would like you to return on Tuesday. In the meantime, go on with your work the same, eat whatever you enjoy and try to increase your amusements a little—the theater, or a concert. Maybe a nightcap before turning in."

When he had shown Mallory out Doctor Crane asked the receptionist not to bring in his next patient until he buzzed for her. It was Mrs. Wheatley again, for whom he could do nothing, really, except a little gentle fencing while he managed to deny her, without making her feel denied, what it was she wanted of him.

Alone, he turned from his desk and opened the doors of a small, inconspicuous cabinet. For relaxation, the doctor did a little sculpture and here in the cabinet was a rather delicate and not too amateurish small figure. She was, in fact, a replica of the girl that Mallory had seen in the restaurant. The goddess of anticipation, Doctor Crane called her to himself (for he had never shown her to

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anyone) who ruled over the next, the new, the promised.

"And so you have shown yourself to another one," he said, chidingly, as though She had been up to mischief. He had no doubt that Mallory would be back on Tuesday, when he would meet Sarton, to whom She showed not a book, of course, but always the new canvas, stretched and waiting, or the brushes, cleaned and soft against Her fingertips, and for whom She surrounded Herself in the odors of fresh pigments and turpentine.

And at the Tuesday meeting Mallory would meet Gavingole, the playwright, to whom She appeared seated before a theater curtain and to whom She had confided Her preference for velvet over other curtain materials and the scalloped folds of vertical risings over center partings. She was waiting (and all around Her were the movements and babble and restless twittering of the expectant crowd) for the play to begin, the play that would never for one moment step its foot out of enchantment.

And there was Mortane, the mathematician, to whom She showed the beginning of a significant mathematical equation, elegantly expressed. It was written in pencil on a scrap of paper and partly obscured by Her wrist.

And there were the others that Mallory would meet (there would be nine of them now, Doctor Crane realized), the stubborn throwbacks in a jaded world, who had in common this powerful and hopeful appetence which could not be killed or diverted or ground into a cynical foreknowledge.

Yes, Mallory would meet them all on Tuesday. And himself, of course, though he had never told them, for he knew he served as their necessary anchor of safety, as indeed they served as his.

"He didn't even notice the color of your hair," Doctor Crane said to the little figure. "But then we mustn't think him unobservant, really, because of course he was paying attention to the book, while I . . ."

He closed the doors of the cabinet gently, emptied Mallory's cigarette butts out of the ashtray and buzzed for Mrs. Wheatley.

No, you couldn't say Mallory was unobservant, not when you remembered that roll. He himself would never, he thought, open another Parker House roll without looking for that tear.

"Nothing really seems to help," Mrs. Wheatley said. "For a while, I thought, but then . . ."

Mrs. Wheatley had chronic lower back pain and a feeling of tiredness, even on awakening. But what she wanted today was for Doctor Crane to say the right thing which would somehow satisfy both her conscience (which was formidable) and her relatives who were threatening to visit. She herself could not tell them her dread of their impending visit. She could not tell tomorrow her

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dread of it, nor tonight, nor even the next hour, unless of course Doctor Crane could somehow give her the word, the phrase, the necessary reason why she should stay forever, as she wished to, in today. For nothing was, to Mrs. Wheatley, *promised;* all things were impending.

There were no more patients after Mrs. Wheatley and as Doctor Crane prepared to leave his office he smiled apologetically toward the cabinet in embarrassment that he had done so poorly with Her. He knew that behind the doors of the cabinet was only a crude and amateurish version of the radiant vision that had been given him, but all the same he was glad he had tried to capture a fraction of it.

How she had looked that day, running up a hill where there was no hill, her lovely red hair flying in the wind, her butterscotch blouse coming loose from the band of her chocolate-colored skirt, her lips parted with laughter. She was chasing one of her children, the little one, the toddler, and when she caught up with him she snatched him into the air and held him above her head and laughed. And then, bracing herself, for the hillside (which wasn't there) was steep and the heavy child had threatened her balance, she turned and looked directly at him.

"I never have that pain any more," she said. "I'm free of it. And I'm only tired with good reason to be. What you did for me made all the difference and what you said to me was of real importance in my life. Why, do you know, even the food I eat, the simplest thing—a piece of bread or fruit—it has such savor and I relish it."

So had he seen Her first, before he had known about the others and learned of Her amazing versatility in appearing to the unrepentantly expectant, the curiously zestful ones. He had not called Her "goddess" then, but only tomorrow's patient, the one that he would really help.

Look for the September issue of **Venture** *featuring:*

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An editor never knows what a manuscript from Gordon R. Dickson will be like. It may be a sensitive mood-piece (Listen!, *F&SF, August, 1952*), *a broad galactic guffaw* (Zeepsday, *November, 1956*), *a mystic parable* (Of the People, *December, 1955*), *or perfectly straight extrapolative s.f.* (MANKIND ON THE RUN, *Ace, 1956*). *Or it may, once in a delightfully blue moon, be something like this: a fantasy-adventure in the vein of de Camp-Pratt's* THE INCOMPLETE ENCHANTER *or Poul Anderson's* THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS, *combining humor, paradox and peril in a tale of the unexpected, of the timeless battle between Good and Evil, and of a different kind of world, governed by the inexorably logical Laws of Magic.*

St. Dragon and the George

by GORDON R. DICKSON

A TRIFLE DIFFIDENTLY, JIM ECKERT rapped with his claw on the blue-painted door.

Silence.

He knocked again. There was the sound of a hasty step inside the small, oddly peak-roofed house and the door was snatched open. A thin-faced old man with a tall pointed cap and a long, rather dingy-looking white beard peered out, irritably.

"Sorry, not my day for dragons!" he snapped. "Come back next Tuesday." He slammed the door.

It was too much. It was the final straw. Jim Eckert sat down on his haunches with a dazed thump. The little forest clearing with its impossible little pool tinkling away like Chinese glass wind chimes in the background, its well-kept greensward with the white gravel path leading to the door before him, and the riotous flower beds of asters, tulips, zinnias, roses and lilies-of-the-valley all equally impossibly in bloom at the same time about the white finger-post labelled S. CAROLINUS and pointing at the house—it all whirled about him. It was more than flesh and blood could bear. At any minute now he would go completely insane and imagine he was a peanut or a cocker spaniel. Grottwold Hanson had

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wrecked them all. Dr. Howells would have to get another teaching assistant for his English Department. Angie . . .

Angie!

Jim pounded on the door again. It was snatched open.

"Dragón!" cried S. Carolinus, furiously. "How would you like to be a beetle?"

"But I'm not a dragon," said Jim, desperately.

The magician stared at him for a long minute, then threw up his beard with both hands in a gesture of despair, caught some of it in his teeth as it fell down and began to chew on it fiercely.

"Now where," he demanded, "did a dragon acquire the brains to develop the imagination to entertain the illusion that he is *not* a dragon? Answer me, O Ye Powers!"

"The information is psychically, though not physiologically correct," replied a deep bass voice out of thin air beside them and some five feet off the ground. Jim, who had taken the question to be rhetorical, started convulsively.

"Is that so?" S. Carolinus peered at Jim with new interest. "Hmm." He spat out a hair or two. "Come in, Anomaly—or whatever you call yourself."

Jim squeezed in through the door and found himself in a large single room. It was a clutter of mismatched furniture and odd bits of alchemical equipment.

"Hmm," said S. Carolinus, closing the door and walking once around Jim, thoughtfully. "If you aren't a dragon, what are you?"

"Well, my real name's Jim Eckert," said Jim. "But I seem to be in the body of a dragon named Gorbash."

"And this disturbs you. So you've come to me. How nice," said the magician, bitterly. He winced, massaged his stomach and closed his eyes. "Do you know anything that's good for a perpetual stomach-ache? Of course not. Go on."

"Well, I want to get back to my real body. And take Angie with me. She's my fiancée and I can send her back but I can't send myself back at the same time. You see this Grottwold Hanson—well, maybe I better start from the beginning."

"Brilliant suggestion, Gorbash," said Carolinus. "Or whatever your name is," he added.

"Well," said Jim. Carolinus winced. Jim hurried on. "I teach at a place called Riveroak College in the United States—you've never heard of it—"

"Go on, go on," said Carolinus.

"That is, I'm a teaching assistant. Dr. Howells, who heads the English Department, promised me an instructorship over a year ago. But he's never come through with it; and Angie—Angie Gilman, my fiancée—"

"You mentioned her."

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"Yes—well, we were having a little fight. That is, we were arguing about my going to ask Howells whether he was going to give me the instructor's rating for next year or not. I didn't think I should; and she didn't think we could get married—well, anyway, in came Grottwold Hanson."

"In *where* came *who?*"

"Into the Campus Bar and Grille. We were having a drink there. Hanson used to go with Angie. He's a graduate student in psychology. A long, thin geek that's just as crazy as he looks. He's always getting wound up in some new odd-ball organization or other—"

"Dictionary!" interrupted Carolinus, suddenly. He opened his eyes as an enormous volume appeared suddenly poised in the air before him. He massaged his stomach. "Ouch," he said. The pages of the volume began to flip rapidly back and forth before his eyes. "Don't mind me," he said to Jim. "Go on."

"—This time it was the Bridey Murphy craze. Hypnotism. Well—"

"Not so fast," said Carolinus. *"Bridey Murphy . . . Hypnotism . . . yes . . ."*

"Oh, he talked about the ego wandering, planes of reality, on and on like that. He offered to hypnotize one of us and show us how it worked. Angie was mad at me, so she said yes. I went off to the bar. I was mad. When I turned around, Angie was gone. Disappeared."

"Vanished?" said Carolinus.

"Vanished. I blew my top at Hanson. She must have wandered, he said, not merely the ego, but all of her. Bring her back, I said. I can't, he said. It seemed she wanted to go back to the time of St. George and the Dragon. When men were men and would speak up to their bosses about promotions. Hanson'd have to send someone else back to rehypnotize her and send her back home. Like an idiot I said I'd go. Ha! I might've known he'd goof. He couldn't do anything right if he was paid for it. I landed in the body of this dragon."

"And the maiden?"

"Oh, she landed here, too. Centuries off the mark. A place where there actually were such things as dragons—fantastic."

"Why?" said Carolinus.

"Well, I mean—anyway," said Jim, hurriedly. "The point is, they'd already got her—the dragons, I mean. A big brute named Anark had found her wandering around and put her in a cage. They were having a meeting in a cave about deciding what to do with her. Anark wanted to stake her out for a decoy, so they could capture a lot of the local people—only the dragons called people *georges*—"

"They're quite stupid, you know," said Carolinus, severely,

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looking up from the dictionary. "There's only room for one name in their head at a time. After the Saint made such an impression on them his name stuck."

"Anyway, they were all yelling at once. They've got tremendous voices."

"Yes, you have," said Carolinus, pointedly.

"Oh, sorry," said Jim. He lowered his voice. "I tried to argue that we ought to hold Angie for ransom—" He broke off suddenly. "Say," he said. "I never thought of that. Was I talking dragon, then? What am I talking now? Dragons don't talk English, do they?"

"Why not?" demanded Carolinus, grumpily. "If they're British dragons?"

"But I'm not a dragon—I mean —"

"But you *are* here!" snapped Carolinus. "You and this maiden of yours. Since all the rest of you was translated here, don't you suppose your ability to speak understandably was translated, too? Continue."

"There's not much more," said Jim, gloomily. "I was losing the argument and then this very big, old dragon spoke up on my side. Hold Angie for ransom, he said. And they listened to him. It seems he swings a lot of weight among them. He's a great-uncle of me—of this Gorbash who's body I'm in —and I'm his only surviving relative. They penned Angie up in a cave and he sent me off to the Tinkling Water here, to find you and have you open negotiations for ransom. Actually, on the side he told me to tell you to make the terms easy on the georges—I mean humans; he wants the dragons to work toward good relations with them. He's afraid the dragons are in danger of being wiped out. I had a chance to double back and talk to Angie alone. We thought you might be able to send us both back."

He stopped rather out of breath, and looked hopefully at Carolinus. The magician was chewing thoughtfully on his beard.

"Smrgol," he muttered. "Now there's an exception to the rule. Very bright for a dragon. Also experienced. Hmm."

"Can you help us?" demanded Jim. "Look, I can show you—"

Carolinus sighed, closed his eyes, winced and opened them again.

"Let me see if I've got it straight," he said. "You had a dispute with this maiden to whom you're betrothed. To spite you, she turned to this third-rate practitioner, who mistakenly exorcized her from the United States (whenever in the cosmos that is) to here, further compounding his error by sending you back in spirit only to inhabit the body of Gorbash. The maiden is in the hands of the dragons and you have been sent to me by your great-uncle Smrgol."

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"That's sort of it," said Jim dubiously, "only—"

"You wouldn't," said Carolinus, "care to change your story to something simpler and more reasonable —like being a prince changed into a dragon by some wicked fairy stepmother? Oh, my poor stomach! No?" He sighed. "All right, that'll be five hundred pounds of gold, or five pounds of rubies, in advance."

"B-but—" Jim goggled at him. "But I don't have any gold—or rubies."

"What? What kind of a dragon are you?" cried Carolinus, glaring at him. "Where's your hoard?"

"I suppose this Gorbash has one," stammered Jim, unhappily. "But I don't know anything about it."

"Another charity patient!" muttered Carolinus, furiously. He shook his fist at empty space. "What's wrong with that auditing department? Well?"

"Sorry," said the invisible bass voice.

"That's the third in two weeks. See it doesn't happen again for another ten days." He turned to Jim. "No means of payment?"

"No. Wait—" said Jim. "This stomach-ache of yours. It might be an ulcer. Does it go away between meals?"

"As a matter of fact, it does. Ulcer?"

"High-strung people working under nervous tension get them back where I come from."

"People?" inquired Carolinus suspiciously. "Or dragons?"

"There aren't any dragons where I come from."

"All right, all right, I believe you," said Carolinus, testily. "You don't have to stretch the truth like that. How do you exorcize them?"

"Milk," said Jim. "A glass every hour for a month or two."

"Milk," said Carolinus. He held out his hand to the open air and received a small tankard of it. He drank it off, making a face. After a moment, the face relaxed into a smile.

"By the Powers!" he said. "By the Powers!" He turned to Jim, beaming. "Congratulations, Gorbash, I'm beginning to believe you about that college business after all. The bovine nature of the milk quite smothers the ulcer-demon. Consider me paid."

"Oh, fine. I'll go get Angie and you can hypnotize—"

"What?" cried Carolinus. "Teach your grandmother to suck eggs. Hypnotize! Ha! And what about the First Law of Magic, eh?"

"The what?" said Jim.

"The First Law—the First Law —didn't they teach you anything in that college? Forgotten it already, I see. Oh, this younger generation! The First Law: *for every use of the Art and Science, there is required a corresponding price.* Why do I live by my fees instead of by conjurations? Why does a magic potion have a bad taste? Why did

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this Hanson-amateur of yours get you all into so much trouble?"

"I don't know," said Jim. "Why?"

"No credit! No credit!" barked Carolinus, flinging his skinny arms wide. "Why, I wouldn't have tried what he did without ten years credit with the auditing department, and *I* am a Master of the Arts. As it was, he couldn't get anything more than your spirit back, after sending the maiden complete. And the fabric of Chance and History is all warped and ready to spring back and cause all kinds of trouble. We'll have to give a little, take a little—"

"GORBASH!" A loud thud outside competed with the dragon-bellow.

"And here we go," said Carolinus dourly. "It's already starting." He led the way outside. Sitting on the greensward just beyond the flower beds was an enormous old dragon Jim recognized as the great-uncle of the body he was in—Smrgol.

"Greetings, Mage!" boomed the old dragon, dropping his head to the ground in salute. "You may not remember me. Name's Smrgol—you remember the business about that ogre I fought at Gormely Keep? I see my grandnephew got to you all right."

"Ah, Smrgol—I remember," said Carolinus. "That was a good job you did."

"He had a habit of dropping his club head after a swing," said Smrgol. "I noticed it along about the fourth hour of battle and the next time he tried it, went in over his guard. Tore up the biceps of his right arm. Then—"

"I remember," Carolinus said. "So this is your nephew."

"Grandnephew," corrected Smrgol. "Little thick-headed and all that," he added apologetically, "but my own flesh and blood, you know."

"You may notice some slight improvement in him," said Carolinus, dryly.

"I hope so," said Smrgol, brightening. "Any change, a change for the better, you know. But I've bad news, Mage. You know that inchworm of an Anark?"

"The one that found the maiden in the first place?"

"That's right. Well, he's stolen her again and run off."

"*What?*" cried Jim.

He had forgotten the capabilities of a dragon's voice. Carolinus tottered, the flowers and grass lay flat, and even Smrgol winced.

"My boy," said the old dragon reproachfully. "How many times must I tell you not to shout. I said, Anark stole the george."

"He means Angie!" cried Jim desperately to Carolinus.

"I know," said Carolinus, with his hands over his ears.

"You're sneezing again," said Smrgol, proudly. He turned to Carolinus. "You wouldn't believe it. A dragon hasn't sneezed in a hundred

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and ninety years. This boy did it the first moment he set eyes on the george. The others couldn't believe it. Sign of brains, I said. Busy brains make the nose itch. Our side of the family—"

"*Angie!*"

"See there? All right now, boy, you've shown us you can do it. Let's get down to business. How much to locate Anark and the george, Mage?"

They dickered like rug-pedlars for several minutes, finally settling on a price of four pounds of gold, one of silver, and a flawed emerald. Carolinus got a small vial of water from the Tinkling Spring and searched among the grass until he found a small sandy open spot. He bent over it and the two dragons sat down to watch.

"Quiet now," he warned. "I'm going to try a watch-beetle. Don't alarm it."

Jim held his breath. Carolinus tilted the vial in his hand and the crystal water fell in three drops —*Tink! Tink!* And again—*Tink!* The sand darkened with the moisture and began to work as if something was digging from below. A hole widened, black insect legs busily in action flickered, and an odd-looking beetle popped itself halfway out of the hole. Its forelimbs waved in the air and a little squeaky voice, like a cracked phonograph record repeating itself far away over a bad telephone connection, came to Jim's ears.

"Gone to the Loathly Tower! Gone to the Loathly Tower! Gone to the Loathly Tower!"

It popped back out of sight. Carolinus straightened up and Jim breathed again.

"The Loathly Tower!" said Smrgol. "Isn't that that ruined tower to the west, in the fens, Mage? Why, that's the place that loosed the blight on the mere-dragons five hundred years ago."

"It's a place of old magic," said Carolinus, grimly. "These places are like ancient sores on the land, scabbed over for a while but always breaking out with new evil when —the twisting of the Fabric by these two must have done it. The evilness there has drawn the evil in Anark to it—lesser to greater, according to the laws of nature. I'll meet you two there. Now, I must go set other forces in motion."

He began to twirl about. His speed increased rapidly until he was nothing but a blur. Then suddenly, he faded away like smoke; and was gone, leaving Jim staring at the spot where he had been.

A poke in the side brought Jim back to the ordinary world.

"Wake up, boy. Don't dally!" the voice of Smrgol bellowed in his ear. "We got flying to do. Come on!"

II

The old dragon's spirit was considerably younger than his body.

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It turned out to be a four hour flight to the fens on the west seacoast. For the first hour or so Smrgol flew along energetically enough, meanwhile tracing out the genealogy of the mere-dragons and their relationship to himself and Gorbash; but gradually his steady flow of chatter dwindled and became intermittent. He tried to joke about his long-gone battle with the Ogre of Gormely Keep, but even this was too much and he fell silent with labored breath and straining wings. After a short but stubborn argument, Jim got him to admit that he would perhaps be better off taking a short breather and then coming on a little later. Smrgol let out a deep gasping sigh and dropped away from Jim in weary spirals. Jim saw him glide to an exhausted landing amongst the purple gorse of the moors below and lie there, sprawled out.

Jim continued on alone. A couple of hours later the moors dropped down a long land-slope to the green country of the fenland. Jim soared out over its spongy, grass-thick earth, broken into causeways and islands by the blue water, which in shallow bays and inlets was itself thick-choked with reeds and tall marsh grass. Flocks of water fowl rose here and there like eddying smoke from the glassy surface of one mere and drifted over to settle on another a few hundred yards away. Their cries came faintly to his dragon-sensitive ears and a line of heavy clouds was piling up against the sunset in the west.

He looked for some sign of the Loathly Tower, but the fenland stretched away to a faint blue line that was probably the sea, without showing sign of anything not built by nature. Jim was beginning to wonder uneasily if he had not gotten himself lost when his eye was suddenly caught by the sight of a dragon-shape nosing at something on one of the little islands amongst the meres.

Anark! he thought. And Angie!

He did not wait to see more. He nosed over and went into a dive like a jet fighter, sights locked on Target Dragon.

It was a good move. Unfortunately Gorbash-Jim, having about the weight and wingspread of a small flivver airplane, made a comparable amount of noise when he was in a dive, assuming the plane's motor to be shut off. Moreover, the dragon on the ground had evidently had experience with the meaning of such a sound; for, without even looking, he went tumbling head over tail out of the way just as Jim slammed into the spot where, a second before, he had been.

The other dragon rolled over onto his feet, sat up, took one look at Jim, and began to wail.

"It's not fair! It's not fair!" he cried in a (for a dragon) remarkably high-pitched voice. "Just because you're bigger than I am. And I'm all horned up. It's the first good

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one I've been able to kill in months and you don't need it, not at all. You're big and fat and I'm so weak and thin and hungry—"

Jim blinked and stared. What he had thought to be Angie, lying in the grass, now revealed itself to be an old and rather stringy-looking cow, badly bitten up and with a broken neck.

"It's just my luck!" the other dragon was weeping. He was less than three-quarters Jim's size and so emaciated he appeared on the verge of collapse. "Everytime I get something good, somebody takes it away. All I ever get to eat is fish—"

"Hold on," said Jim.

"Fish, fish, fish. Cold, nasty fi—"

"Hold on, I say! SHUT UP!" bellowed Jim, in Gorbash's best voice.

The other dragon stopped his wailing as suddenly as if his switch had been shut off.

"Yes, sir," he said, timidly.

"What's the matter? I'm not going to take this from you."

The other dragon tittered uncertainly.

"I'm not," said Jim. "It's your cow. All yours."

"He-he-he!" said the other dragon. "You certainly are a card, your honor."

"Blast it, I'm serious!" cried Jim. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Oh, well—" the other squirmed. "Oh well, you know—"

"What's your name?"

"Secoh, your worship!" yelped the dragon, frightenedly. "Just Secoh. Nobody important. Just a little, unimportant mere-dragon, your highness, that's all I am. Really!"

"All right, Secoh, dig in. All I want is some directions."

"Well—if your worship really doesn't . . ." Secoh had been sidling forward in fawning fashion. "If you'll excuse my table manners sir. I'm just a mere-dragon—" and he tore into the meat before him in sudden, terrified, starving fashion.

Jim watched. Unexpectedly, his long tongue flickered out to lick his chops. His belly rumbled. He was astounded at himself. Raw meat? Off a dead animal—flesh, bones, hide and all? He took a firm grip on his appetites.

"Er, Secoh," he said. "I'm a stranger around these parts. I suppose you know the territory. . . . Say, how does that cow taste, anyway?"

"Oh, terrubble—mumpf—" replied Secoh, with his mouth full. "Stringy—old. Good enough for a mere-dragon like myself, but not—"

"Well, about these directions—"

"Yes, your highness?"

"I think . . . you know it's your cow . . ."

"That's what your honor said," replied Secoh, cautiously.

"But I just wonder . . . you know I've never tasted a cow like that."

Secoh muttered something despairingly under his breath.

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"What?" said Jim.

"I said," said Secoh, resignedly, "wouldn't your worship like to t-taste it—"

"Not if you're going to cry about it," said Jim.

"I bit my tongue."

"Well, in that case . . ." Jim walked up and sank his teeth in the shoulder of the carcass. Rich juices trickled enticingly over his tongue. . . .

Some little time later he and Secoh sat back polishing bones with the rough uppers of their tongues which were as abrasive as steel files.

"Did you get enough to eat, Secoh?" asked Jim.

"More than enough, sir," replied the mere-dragon, staring at the white skeleton with a wild and famished eye. "Although, if your exaltedness doesn't mind, I've a weakness for marrow. . . ." He picked up a thighbone and began to crunch it like a stick of candy.

"Now," said Jim. "About this Loathly Tower. Where is it?"

"The wh-what?" stammered Secoh, dropping the thighbone.

"The Loathly Tower. It's in the fens. You know of it, don't you?"

"Oh, sir! Yes, sir. But you wouldn't want to go there sir! Not that I'm presuming to give your lordship advice—" cried Secoh, in a suddenly high and terrified voice.

"No, no," soothed Jim. "What are you so upset about?"

"Well—of course I'm only a timid little mere-dragon. But it's a terrible place, the Loathly Tower, your worship, sir."

"How? Terrible?"

"Well—well, it just is." Secoh cast an unhappy look around him. "It's what spoiled all of us, you know, five hundred years ago. We used to be like other dragons—oh, not so big and handsome as you, sir. Then, after that, they say it was the Good got the upper hand and the Evil in the Tower was vanquished and the Tower itself ruined. But it didn't help us mere-dragons any, and I wouldn't go there if I was your worship, I really wouldn't."

"But what's so bad? What sort of thing is it?"

"Well, I wouldn't say there was any real *thing* there. Nothing your worship could put a claw on. It's just strange things go to it and strange things come out of it; and lately . . ."

"Lately what?"

"Nothing—nothing, really, your excellency!" cried Secoh. "Your illustriousness shouldn't catch a worthless little mere-dragon up like that. I only meant, lately the Tower's seemed more fearful than ever. That's all."

"Probably your imagination," said Jim, shortly. "Anyway, where is it?"

"You have to go north about five miles." While they had eaten and talked, the sunset had died. It was almost dark now; and Jim had to

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strain his eyes through the gloom to see the mere-dragon's foreclaw, pointing away across the mere. "To the Great Causeway. It's a wide lane of solid ground running east and west through the fens. You follow it west to the Tower. The Tower stands on a rock overlooking the sea-edge."

"Five miles . . ." said Jim. He considered the soft grass on which he lay. His armored body seemed undisturbed by the temperature, whatever it was. "I might as well get some sleep. See you in the morning, Secoh." He obeyed a sudden, bird-like instinct and tucked his ferocious head and long neck back under one wing.

"Whatever your excellency desires . . ." the mere-dragon's muffled voice came distantly to his ear. "Your excellency has only to call and I'll be immediately available. . . ."

The words faded out on Jim's ear, as he sank into sleep like a heavy stone into deep, dark waters.

When he opened his eyes, the sun was up. He sat up himself, yawned, and blinked.

Secoh was gone. So were the leftover bones.

"Blast!" said Jim. But the morning was too nice for annoyance. He smiled at his mental picture of Secoh carefully gathering the bones in fearful silence, and sneaking them away.

The smile did not last long. When he tried to take off in a northerly direction, as determined by reference to the rising sun, he found he had charley horses in both the huge wing-muscles that swelled out under the armor behind his shoulders. The result of course, of yesterday's heavy exercise. Grumbling, he was forced to proceed on foot; and four hours later, very hot, muddy and wet, he pulled his weary body up onto the broad east-and-west-stretching strip of land which must, of necessity, be the Great Causeway. It ran straight as a Roman road through the meres, several feet higher than the rest of the fenland, and was solid enough to support good-sized trees. Jim collapsed in the shade of one with a heartfelt sigh.

He awoke to the sound of someone singing. He blinked and lifted his head. Whatever the earlier verses of the song had been, Jim had missed them; but the approaching baritone voice now caroled the words of the chorus merrily and clearly to his ear:

"A right good sword, a constant mind,
A trusty spear and true!
The dragons of the mere shall find
What Nevile-Smythe can do!"

The tune and words were vaguely familiar. Jim sat up for a better look and a knight in full armor rode into view on a large white horse through the trees. Then ev-

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erything happened at once. The knight saw him, the visor of his armor came down with a clang, his long spear seemed to jump into his mailed hand and the horse under him leaped into a gallop, heading for Jim. Gorbash's reflexes took over. They hurled Jim straight up into the air, where his punished wing muscles cracked and faltered. He was just able to manage enough of a fluttering flop to throw himself into the upper branches of a small tree nearby.

The knight skidded his horse to a stop below and looked up through the spring-budded branches. He tilted his visor back to reveal a piercing pair of blue eyes, a rather hawk-like nose and a jutting generous chin, all assembled into a clean-shaven young-man's face. He looked eagerly up at Jim.

"Come down," he said.

"No thanks," said Jim, hanging firmly to the tree. There was a slight pause as they both digested the situation.

"Dashed caitiff mere-dragon!" said the knight finally, with annoyance.

"I'm not a mere-dragon," said Jim.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said the knight.

"I'm not," repeated Jim. He thought a minute. "I'll bet you can't guess who I really am."

The knight did not seem interested in guessing who Jim really was. He stood up in his stirrups and probed through the branches with his spear. The point did not quite reach Jim.

"Damn!" Disappointedly, he lowered the spear and became thoughtful. "I can climb the dashed tree," he muttered to himself. "But then what if he flies down and I have to fight him unhorsed, eh?"

"Look," called Jim, peering down—the knight looked up eagerly—"if you'll listen to what I've to say, first."

The knight considered.

"Fair enough," he said, finally. "No pleas for mercy, now!"

"No, no," said Jim.

"Because I shan't grant them, dammit! It's not in my vows. Widows and orphans and honorable enemies on the field of battle. But not dragons."

"No. I just want to convince you who I really am."

"I don't give a blasted farthing who you really are."

"You will," said Jim. "Because I'm not really a dragon at all. I've just been—uh—enchanted into a dragon."

The man on the ground looked skeptical.

"Really," said Jim, slipping a little in the tree. "You know S. Carolinus, the magician? I'm as human as you are."

"Heard of him," grunted the knight. "You'll say *he* put you under?"

"No, he's the one who's going to change me back—as soon as I

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can find the lady I'm—er—betrothed to. A real dragon ran off with her. I'm after him. Look at me. Do I look like one of these scrawny mere-dragons?"

"Hmm," said the knight. He rubbed his hooked nose thoughtfully.

"Carolinus found she's at the Loathly Tower. I'm on my way there."

The knight stared.

"The Loathly Tower?" he echoed.

"Exactly," said Jim, firmly. "And now you know, your honor as knight and gentleman demands you don't hamper my rescue efforts."

The knight continued to think it over for a long moment or two. He was evidently not the sort to be rushed into things.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" he said at last.

"Hold your sword up. I'll swear on the cross of its hilt."

"But if you're a dragon, what's the good in that? Dragons don't have souls, dammit!"

"No," said Jim, "but a Christian gentleman has; and if I'm a Christian gentleman, I wouldn't dare forswear myself like that, would I?"

The knight struggled visibly with this logic for several seconds. Finally, he gave up.

"Oh, well . . ." He held up his sword by the point and let Jim swear on it. Then he put the sword back in its sheath as Jim descended.

"Well," he said, still a little doubtfully, "I suppose, under the circumstances, we ought to introduce ourselves. You know my arms?"

Jim looked at the shield which the other swung around for his inspection. It showed a wide X of silver—like a cross lying over sideways—on a red background and above some sort of black animal in profile which seemed to be lying down between the X's bottom legs.

"The gules, a saltire argent, of course," went on the knight, "are the Nevile of Raby arms. My father, as a cadet of the house, differenced with a hart lodged sable—you see it there at the bottom. Naturally, as his heir, I carry the family arms."

"Nevile-Smythe," said Jim, remembering the name from the song.

"Sir Reginald, knight bachelor. And you, sir?"

"Why, uh . . ." Jim clutched frantically at what he knew of heraldry. "I bear—in my proper body, that is—"

"Quite."

"A . . . : gules, a typewriter argent, on a desk sable. Eckert, Sir James—uh—knight bachelor. Baron of—er—Riveroak."

Nevile-Smythe was knitting his brows.

"Typewriter . . ." he was muttering, "typewriter . . ."

"A local beast, rather like a griffin," said Jim, hastily. "We have a

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lot of them in Riveroak—that's in America, a land over the sea to the west. You may not have heard of it."

"Can't say that I have. Was it there you were enchanted into this dragon-shape?"

"Well, yes and no. I was transported to this land by magic as was the—uh—lady Angela. When I woke here I was bedragoned."

"Were you?" Sir Reginald's blue eyes bulged a little in amazement. "Angela—fair name, that! Like to meet her. Perhaps after we get this muddle cleared up, we might have a bit of a set-to on behalf of our respective ladies."

Jim gulped slightly.

"Oh, you've got one, too?"

"Absolutely. And she's tremendous. The Lady Elinor—" The knight turned about in his saddle and began to fumble about his equipment. Jim, on reaching the ground, had at once started out along the causeway in the direction of the Tower, so that the knight happened to be pacing alongside him on horseback when he suddenly went into these evolutions. It seemed to bother his charger not at all. "Got her favor here someplace—half a moment—"

"Why don't you just tell me what it's like?" said Jim, sympathetically.

"Oh, well," said Nevile-Smythe, giving up his search, "it's a kerchief, you know. Monogrammed. E. d'C. She's a deChauncy. It's rather too bad, though. I'd have liked to show it to you since we're going to the Loathly Tower together."

"We are?" said Jim, startled. "But—I mean, it's my job. I didn't think you'd want—"

"Lord, yes," said Nevile-Smythe, looking somewhat startled himself. "A gentleman of coat-armor like myself—and an outrage like this taking place locally. I'm no knight-errant, dash it, but I *do* have a decent sense of responsibility."

"I mean—I just meant—" stumbled Jim. "What if something happened to you? What would the Lady Elinor say?"

"Why, what could she say?" replied Nevile-Smythe in plain astonishment. "No one but an utter rotter dodges his plain duty. Besides, there may be a chance here for me to gain a little worship. Elinor's keen on that. She wants me to come home safe."

Jim blinked.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Beg pardon?"

Jim explained his confusion.

"Why, how do you people do things, overseas?" said Nevile-Smythe. "After we're married and I have lands of my own, I'll be expected to raise a company and march out at my lord's call. If I've no name as a knight, I'll be able to raise nothing but bumpkins and clodpoles who'll desert at the first sight of steel. On the other hand, if I've a name, I'll have good men coming to serve under my banner; because, you see, they know I'll take

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good care of them; and by the same token they'll take good care of me—I say, isn't it getting dark rather suddenly?"

Jim glanced at the sky. It was indeed—almost the dimness of twilight although it could, by rights, be no more than early afternoon yet. Glancing ahead up the Causeway, he became aware of a further phenomenon. A line seemed to be cutting across the trees and grass and even extending out over the waters of the meres on both sides. Moreover, it seemed to be moving toward them as if some heavy, invisible fluid was slowly flooding out over the low country of the fenland.

"Why—" he began. A voice wailed suddenly from his left to interrupt him.

"No! No! Turn back, your worship. Turn back! It's death in there!"

They turned their heads sharply. Secoh, the mere-dragon, sat perched on a half-drowned tussock about forty feet out in the mere.

"Come here, Secoh!" called Jim.

"No! No!" The invisible line was almost to the tussock. Secoh lifted heavily into the air and flapped off, crying. "Now it's loose! It's broken loose again. And we're all lost . . . lost . . . lost . . ."

His voice wailed away and was lost in the distance. Jim and Nevile-Smythe looked at each other.

"Now, that's one of our local dragons for you!" said the knight disgustedly. "How can a gentleman of coat armor gain honor by slaying a beast like that? The worst of it is when someone from the Midlands compliments you on being a drag-on-slayer and you have to explain—"

At that moment either they both stepped over the line, or the line moved past them—Jim was never sure which; and they both stopped, as by one common, instinctive impulse. Looking at Sir Reginald, Jim could see under the visor how the knight's face had gone pale.

"In manus tuas Domine," said Nevile-Smythe, crossing himself.

About and around them, the serest gray of winter light lay on the fens. The waters of the meres lay thick and oily, still between the shores of dull green grass. A small, cold breeze wandered through the tops of the reeds and they rattled together with a dry and distant sound like old bones cast out into a forgotten courtyard for the wind to play with. The trees stood helpless and still, their new, small leaves now pinched and faded like children aged before their time while all about and over all the heaviness of dead hope and bleak despair lay on all living things.

"Sir James," said the knight, in an odd tone and accents such as Jim had not heard him use before, "wot well that we have this day set our hands to no small task. Wherefore I pray thee that we should push forward, come what

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may, for my heart faileth and I think me that it may well hap that I return not, ne no man know mine end."

Having said this, he immediately reverted to his usual cheerful self and swung down out of his saddle. "Clarivaux won't go another inch, dash it!" he said. "I shall have to lead him—by the bye, did you know that mere-dragon?"

Jim fell into step beside him and they went on again, but a little more slowly, for everything seemed an extra effort under this darkening sky.

"I talked to him yesterday," said Jim. "He's not a bad sort of dragon."

"Oh, I've nothing against the beasts, myself. But one slays them when one finds them, you know."

"An old dragon—in fact he's the granduncle of this body I'm in," said Jim, "thinks that dragons and humans really ought to get together. Be friends, you know."

"Extraordinary thought!" said Nevile-Smythe, staring at Jim in astonishment.

"Well actually," said Jim, "why not?"

"Well, I don't know. It just seems like it wouldn't do."

"He says men and dragons might find common foes to fight together."

"Oh, that's where he's wrong, though. You couldn't trust dragons to stick by you in a bicker. And what if your enemy had dragons of his own? They wouldn't fight each other. No. No."

They fell silent. They had moved away from the grass onto flat sandy soil. There was a sterile, flinty hardness to it. It crunched under the hooves of Clarivaux, at once unyielding and treacherous.

"Getting darker, isn't it?" said Jim, finally.

The light was, in fact, now down to a grayish twilight through which it was impossible to see more than a dozen feet. And it was dwindling as they watched. They had halted and stood facing each other. The light fled steadily, and faster. The dimness became blacker, and blacker—until finally the last vestige of illumination was lost and blackness, total and complete, overwhelmed them. Jim felt a gauntleted hand touch one of his forelimbs.

"Let's hold together," said the voice of the knight. "Then whatever comes upon us, must come upon us all at once."

"Right," said Jim. But the word sounded cold and dead in his throat.

They stood, in silence and in lightlessness, waiting for they did not know what. And the blankness about them pressed further in on them, now that it had isolated them, nibbling at the very edges of their minds. Out of the nothingness came nothing material, but from within them crept up one by one, like blind white slugs from

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some bottomless pit, all their inner doubts and fears and unknown weaknesses, all the things of which they had been ashamed and which they had tucked away to forget, all the maggots of their souls.

Jim found himself slowly, stealthily beginning to withdraw his forelimb from under the knight's touch. He no longer trusted Nevile-Smythe—for the evil that must be in the man because of the evil he knew to be in himself. He would move away . . . off into the darkness alone . . .

"Look!" Nevile-Smythe's voice cried suddenly to him, distant and eerie, as if from someone already a long way off. "Look back the way we came."

Jim turned about. Far off in the darkness, there was a distant glimmer of light. It rolled toward them, growing as it came. They felt its power against the power of lightlessness that threatened to overwhelm them; and the horse Clarivaux stirred unseen beside them, stamped his hooves on the hard sand, and whinnied.

"This way!" called Jim.

"This way!" shouted Nevile-Smythe.

The light shot up suddenly in height. Like a great rod it advanced toward them and the darkness was rolling back, graying, disappearing. They heard a sound of feet close, and a sound of breathing, and then—

It was daylight again.

And S. Carolinus stood before them in tall hat and robes figured with strange images and signs. In his hand upright before him—as if it was blade and buckler, spear and armor all in one—he held a tall carven staff of wood.

"By the Powers!" he said. "I was in time. Look there!"

He lifted the staff and drove it point down into the soil. It went in and stood erect like some denuded tree. His long arm pointed past them and they turned around.

The darkness was gone. The fens lay revealed far and wide, stretching back a long way, and up ahead, meeting the thin dark line of the sea. The Causeway had risen until they now stood twenty feet above the mere-waters. Ahead to the west, the sky was ablaze with sunset. It lighted up all the fens and the end of the Causeway leading onto a long and bloody-looking hill, whereon—touched by that same dying light—there loomed above and over all, amongst great tumbled boulders, the ruined, dark and shattered shell of a Tower as black as jet.

III

"—why didn't you wake us earlier, then?" asked Jim.

It was the morning after. They had slept the night within the small circle of protection afforded by Carolinus' staff. They were sitting up now and rubbing their eyes in

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the light of a sun that had certainly been above the horizon a good two hours.

"Because," said Carolinus. He was sipping at some more milk and he stopped to make a face of distaste. "Because we had to wait for them to catch up with us."

"Who? Catch up?" asked Jim.

"If I knew *who,*" snapped Carolinus, handing his empty milk tankard back to emptier air, "I would have said *who*. All I know is that the present pattern of Chance and History implies that two more will join our party. The same pattern implied the presence of this knight and—oh, so that's who they are."

Jim turned around to follow the magician's gaze. To his surprise, two dragon shapes were emerging from a clump of brush behind them.

"Secoh!" cried Jim. "And—Smrgol! Why—" His voice wavered and died. The old dragon, he suddenly noticed, was limping and one wing hung a little loosely, half-drooping from its shoulder. Also, the eyelid on the same side as the loose wing and stiff leg was sagging more or less at half-mast. "Why, what happened?"

"Oh, a bit stiff from yesterday," huffed Smrgol, bluffly. "Probably pass off in a day or two."

"Stiff nothing!" said Jim, touched in spite of himself. "You've had a stroke."

"Stroke of bad luck, *I'd* say," replied Smrgol, cheerfully, trying to wink his bad eye and not succeeding very well. "No, boy, it's nothing. Look who I've brought along."

"I—I wasn't too keen on coming," said Secoh, shyly, to Jim. "But your granduncle can be pretty persuasive, your wo— you know."

"That's right!" boomed Smrgol. "Don't you go calling anybody your worship. Never heard of such stuff!" He turned to Jim. "And letting a george go in where he didn't dare go himself! Boy, I said to him, don't give me this *only a mere-dragon* and *just a mere-dragon*. Mere's got nothing to do with what kind of dragon you are. What kind of a world would it be if we were all like that?" Smrgol mimicked (as well as his dragon-basso would let him) someone talking in a high, simpering voice. "Oh, I'm just a plowland-and-pasture dragon—you'll have to excuse me I'm only a halfway-up-the-hill dragon—*Boy!*" bellowed Smrgol, "I said, you're a *dragon!* Remember that. And a dragon acts like a dragon or he doesn't act at all!"

"Hear! Hear!" said Nevile-Smythe, carried away by enthusiasm.

"Hear that, boy? Even the george here knows that. Don't believe I've met you, george," he added, turning to the knight.

"Nevile-Smythe, Sir Reginald. Knight bachelor."

"Smrgol. Dragon."

"Smrgol? You aren't the—but you couldn't be. Over a hundred years ago."

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"The dragon who slew the Ogre of Gormely Keep? That's who I am, boy—george, I mean."

"By Jove! Always thought it was a legend, only."

"Legend? Not on your honor, george! I'm old—even for a dragon, but there was a time—well, well, we won't go into that. I've something more important to talk to you about. I've been doing a lot of thinking the last decade or so about us dragons and you georges getting together. Actually, we're really a lot alike—"

"If you don't mind, Smrgol," cut in Carolinus, snappishly, "we aren't out here to hold a parlement. It'll be noon in—when will it be noon, you?"

"Four hours, thirty-seven minutes, twelve seconds at the sound of the gong," replied the invisible bass voice. There was a momentary pause, and then a single mellow, chimed note. "Chime, I mean," the voice corrected itself.

"Oh, go back to bed!" cried Carolinus, furiously.

"I've been up for hours," protested the voice, indignantly.

Carolinus ignored it, herding the party together and starting them off for the Tower. The knight fell in beside Smrgol.

"About this business of men and dragons getting together," said Nevile-Smythe. "Confess I wasn't much impressed until I heard your name. D'you think it's possible?"

"Got to make a start sometime, george." Smrgol rumbled on. Jim, who had moved up to the head of the column to walk beside Carolinus, spoke to the magician.

"What lives in the Tower?"

Carolinus jerked his fierce old bearded face around to look at him.

"What's *living* there?" he snapped. "I don't know. We'll find out soon enough. What *is* there—neither alive nor dead, just in existence at the spot—is the manifestation of pure evil."

"But how can we do anything against that?"

"We can't. We can only contain it. Just as you—if you're essentially a good person—contain the potentialities for evil in yourself, by killing its creatures, your evil impulses and actions."

"Oh?" said Jim.

"Certainly. And since evil opposes good in like manner, its creatures, the ones in the Tower, will try to destroy us."

Jim felt a cold lump in his throat. He swallowed.

"Destroy us?"

"Why no, they'll probably just invite us to tea—" The sarcasm in the old magician's voice broke off suddenly with the voice itself. They had just stepped through a low screen of bushes and instinctively checked to a halt.

Lying on the ground before them was what once had been a man in full armor. Jim heard the sucking intake of breath from Nevile-Smythe behind him.

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"A most foul death," said the knight softly, "most foul . . ." He came forward and dropped clumsily to his armored knees, joining his gauntleted hands in prayer. The dragons were silent. Carolinus poked with his staff at a wide trail of slime that led around and over the body and back toward the Tower. It was the sort of trail a garden slug might have left—if this particular garden slug had been two or more feet wide where it touched the ground.

"A Worm," said Carolinus. "But Worms are mindless. No Worm killed him in such cruel fashion." He lifted his head to the old dragon.

"I didn't say it, Mage," rumbled Smrgol, uneasily.

"Best none of us say it until we know for certain. Come on." Carolinus took up the lead and led them forward again.

They had come up off the Causeway onto the barren plain that sloped up into a hill in which stood the Tower. They could see the wide fens and the tide flats coming to meet them in the arms of a small bay—and beyond that the sea, stretching misty to the horizon.

The sky above was blue and clear. No breeze stirred; but, as they looked at the Tower and the hill that held it, it seemed that the azure above had taken on a metallic cast. The air had a quivering unnaturalness like an atmosphere dancing to heat waves, though the day was chill; and there came on Jim's ears, from where he did not know, a high-pitched dizzy singing like that which accompanies delirium, or high fever.

The Tower itself was distorted by these things. So that although to Jim it seemed only the ancient, ruined shell of a building, yet, between one heartbeat and the next, it seemed to change. Almost, but not quite, he caught glimpses of it unbroken and alive and thronged about with fantastic, half-seen figures. His heart beat stronger with the delusion; and its beating shook the scene before him, all the hill and Tower, going in and out of focus, in and out, *in* and *out* . . .

. . . And there was Angie, in the Tower's doorway, calling him . . .

"Stop!" shouted Carolinus. His voice echoed like a clap of thunder in Jim's ears; and Jim awoke to his senses, to find himself straining against the barrier of Carolinus' staff, that barred his way to the Tower like a rod of iron. "By the Powers!" said the old magician, softly and fiercely. "Will you fall into the first trap set for you?"

"Trap?" echoed Jim, bewilderedly. But he had no time to go further, for at that moment there rose from among the giant boulders at the Tower's base the heavy, wicked head of a dragon as large as Smrgol.

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The thunderous bellow of the old dragon beside Jim split the unnatural air.

"Anark! Traitor—thief—inchworm! Come down here!"

Booming dragon-laughter rolled back an answer.

"Tell us about Gormely Keep, old bag of bones! Ancient mudpuppy, fat lizard, scare us with words!"

Smrgol lurched forward; and again Carolinus' staff was extended to bar the way.

"Patience," said the magician. But with one wrenching effort, the old dragon had himself under control. He turned, panting, to Carolinus.

"What's hidden, Mage?" he demanded.

"We'll see." Grimly, Carolinus brought his staff, endwise, three times down upon the earth. With each blow the whole hill seemed to shake and shudder.

Up among the rocks, one particularly large boulder tottered and rolled aside. Jim caught his breath and Secoh cried out, suddenly.

In the gap that the boulder revealed, a thick, slug-like head was lifting from the ground. It reared, yellow-brown in the sunlight, its two sets of horns searching and revealing a light external shell, a platelet with a merest hint of spire. It lowered its head and slowly, inexorably, began to flow downhill toward them, leaving its glistening trail behind it.

"Now—" said the knight. But Carolinus shook his head. He struck at the ground again.

"Come forth!" he cried, his thin, old voice piping on the quivering air. "By the Powers! Come forth!"

And then they saw it.

From behind the great barricade of boulders, slowly, there reared first a bald and glistening dome of hairless skin. Slowly this rose, revealing two perfectly round eyes below which they saw, as the whole came up, no proper nose, but two air-slits side by side as if the whole of the bare, enormous skull was covered with a simple sheet of thick skin. And rising still further, this unnatural head, as big around as a beach ball, showed itself to possess a wide and idiot-grinning mouth, entirely lipless and revealing two jagged, matching rows of yellow teeth.

Now, with a clumsy, studied motion, the whole creature rose to its feet and stood knee-deep in the boulders and towering above them. It was man-like in shape, but clearly nothing ever spawned by the human race. A good twelve feet high it stood, a rough patchwork kilt of untanned hides wrapped around its thick waist—but this was not the extent of its differences from the race of Man. It had, to begin with, no neck at all. That obscene beachball of a hairless, near-featureless head balanced like an apple on thick, square shoulders of gray, coarse-looking skin. Its torso was one straight trunk,

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from which its arms and legs sprouted with a disproportionate thickness and roundness, like sections of pipe. Its knees were hidden by its kilt and its further legs by the rocks; but the elbows of its oversize arms had unnatural hinges to them, almost as if they had been doubled, and the lower arms were almost as large as the upper and near-wristless, while the hands themselves were awkward, thick-fingered parodies of the human extremity, with only three digits, of which one was a single, opposed thumb.

The right hand held a club, bound with rusty metal, that surely not even such a monster should have been able to lift. Yet one grotesque hand carried it lightly, as lightly as Carolinus had carried his staff. The monster opened its mouth.

"He!" it went. "He! He!"

The sound was fantastic. It was a bass titter, if such a thing could be imagined. Though the tone of it was as low as the lowest note of a good operatic basso, it clearly came from the creature's upper throat and head. Nor was there any real humor in it. It was an utterance with a nervous, habitual air about it, like a man clearing his throat. Having sounded, it fell silent, watching the advance of the great slug with its round, light blue eyes.

Smrgol exhaled slowly.

"Yes," he rumbled, almost sadly, almost as if to himself. "What I was afraid of. An ogre."

In the silence that followed, Nevile-Smythe got down from his horse and began to tighten the girths of its saddle.

"So, so, Clarivaux," he crooned to the trembling horse. "So ho, boy."

The rest of them were looking all at Carolinus. The magician leaned on his staff, seeming very old indeed, with the deep lines carven in the ancient skin of his face. He had been watching the ogre, but now he turned back to Jim and the other two dragons.

"I had hoped all along," he said, "that it needn't come to this. However," he crackled sourly, and waved his hand at the approaching Worm, the silent Anark and the watching ogre, "as you see . . . The world goes never the way we want it by itself, but must be haltered and led." He winced, produced his flask and cup, and took a drink of milk. Putting the utensils back, he looked over at Nevile-Smythe, who was now checking his weapons. "I'd suggest, Knight, that you take the Worm. It's a poor chance, but your best. I know you'd prefer that renegade dragon, but the Worm is the greater danger."

"Difficult to slay, I imagine?" queried the knight.

"Its vital organs are hidden deep inside it," said Carolinus, "and being mindless, it will fight on long

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after being mortally wounded. Cut off those eye-stalks and blind it first, if you can—"

"Wait!" cried Jim, suddenly. He had been listening bewilderedly. Now the word seemed to jump out of his mouth. "What're we going to do?"

"Do?" said Carolinus, looking at him. "Why, fight, of course."

"But," stammered Jim, "wouldn't it be better to go get some help? I mean—"

"Blast it, boy!" boomed Smrgol. "We can't wait for that! Who knows what'll happen if we take time for something like that? Hell's bell's, Gorbash, lad, you got to fight your foes when you meet them, not the next day, or the day after that."

"Quite right, Smrgol," said Carolinus, dryly. "Gorbash, you don't understand this situation. Every time you retreat from something like this, it gains and you lose. The next time the odds would be even worse against us."

They were all looking at him. Jim felt the impact of their curious glances. He did not know what to say. He wanted to tell them that he was not a fighter, that he did not know the first thing to do in this sort of battle, that it was none of his business anyway and that he would not be here at all, if it were not for Angie. He was, in fact, quite humanly scared, and floundered desperately for some sort of strength to lean on.

"What—what am I supposed to do?" he said.

"Why, fight the ogre, boy! Fight the ogre!" thundered Smrgol—and the inhuman giant up on the slope, hearing him, shifted his gaze suddenly from the Worm to fasten it on Jim. "And I'll take on that louse of an Anark. The george here'll chop up the Worm, the Mage'll hold back the bad influences—and there we are."

"Fight the ogre . . ." If Jim had still been possessed of his ordinary two legs, they would have buckled underneath him. Luckily his dragon-body knew no such weakness. He looked at the overwhelming bulk of his expected opponent, contrasted the ogre with himself, the armored, ox-heavy body of the Worm with Nevile-Smythe, the deep-chested over-size Anark with the crippled old dragon beside him —and a cry of protest rose from the very depths of his being. "But we can't win!"

He turned furiously on Carolinus, who, however, looked at him calmly. In desperation he turned back to the only normal human he could find in the group.

"Nevile-Smythe," he said. "You don't need to do this."

"Lord, yes," replied the knight, busy with his equipment. "Worms, ogres—one fights them when one runs into them, you know." He considered his spear and put it aside. "Believe I'll face it on foot," he murmured to himself.

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"Smrgol!" said Jim. "Don't you see—can't you understand? Anark is a lot younger than you. And you're not well—"

"Er . . ." said Secoh, hesitantly.

"Speak up, boy!" rumbled Smrgol.

"Well," stammered Secoh, "it's just . . . what I mean is, I couldn't bring myself to fight that Worm or that ogre—I really couldn't. I just sort of go to pieces when I think of them getting close to me. But I *could*—well, fight another dragon. It wouldn't be quite so bad, if you know what I mean, if that dragon up there breaks my neck—" He broke down and stammered incoherently. "I know I sound awfully silly—"

"Nonsense! Good lad!" bellowed Smrgol. "Glad to have you. I—er—can't quite get into the air myself at the moment—still a bit stiff. But if you could fly over and work him down this way where I can get a grip on him, we'll stretch him out for the buzzards." And he dealt the mere-dragon a tremendous thwack with his tail by way of congratulation, almost knocking Secoh off his feet.

In desperation, Jim turned back to Carolinus.

"There is no retreat," said Carolinus, calmly, before Jim could speak. "This is a game of chess where if one piece withdraws, all fall. Hold back the creatures, and I will hold back the forces—for the creatures will finish me, if you go down, and the forces will finish you if they get me."

"Now, look here, Gorbash!" shouted Smrgol in Jim's ear. "That Worm's almost here. Let me tell you something about how to fight ogres, based on experience. You listening, boy?"

"Yes," said Jim, numbly.

"I know you've heard the other dragons calling me an old windbag when I wasn't around. But I *have* conquered an ogre—the only one in our race to do it in the last eight hundred years—and they haven't. So pay attention, if you want to win your own fight."

Jim gulped.

"All right," he said.

"Now, the first thing to know," boomed Smrgol, glancing at the Worm who was now less than fifty yards distant, "is about the bones in an ogre—"

"Never mind the details!" cried Jim. "What do I do?"

"In a minute," said Smrgol. "Don't get excited, boy. Now, about the bones in an ogre. The thing to remember is that they're big—matter of fact in the arms and legs, they're mainly bone. So there's no use trying to bite clear through, if you get a chance. What you try to do is get at the muscle—that's tough enough as it is—and hamstring. That's point one." He paused to look severely at Jim.

"Now, point two," he continued, "also connected with bones. Notice the elbows on that ogre. They

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aren't like a george's elbows. They're what you might call double-jointed. I mean, they have two joints where a george has just the one. Why? Simply because with the big bones they got to have and the muscle on them, they'd never be able to bend an arm more than halfway up before the bottom part'd bump the top if they had a george-type joint. Now, the point of all this is that when it swings that club, it can only swing in one way with that elbow. That's up and down. If it wants to swing it side to side, it's got to use its shoulder. Consequently if you can catch it with its club down and to one side of the body, you got an advantage; because it takes two motions to get it back up and in line again—instead of one, like a george."

"Yes, yes," said Jim, impatiently, watching the advance of the Worm.

"Don't get impatient, boy. Keep cool. Keep cool. Now, the knees don't have that kind of joint, so if you can knock it off its feet you got a real advantage. But don't try that, unless you're sure you can do it; because once it gets you pinned, you're a goner. The way to fight it is in-and-out—fast. Wait for a swing, dive in, tear him, get back out again. Got it?"

"Got it," said Jim, numbly.

"Good. Whatever you do, don't let it get a grip on you. Don't pay attention to what's happening to the rest of us, no matter what you hear or see. It's every one for himself. Concentrate on your own foe; and *keep your head*. Don't let your dragon instinct to get in there and slug run away with you. That's why the georges have been winning against us as they have. Just remember you're faster than that ogre and your brains'll win for you if you stay clear, keep your head and don't rush. I tell you, boy—"

He was interrupted by a sudden cry of joy from Nevile-Smythe, who had been rummaging around Clarivaux's saddle.

"I say!" shouted Nevile-Smythe, running up to them with suprising lightness, considering his armor. "The most marvelous stroke of luck! Look what I found." He waved a wispy stretch of cloth at them.

"What?" demanded Jim, his heart going up in one sudden leap.

"Elinor's favor! And just in time, too. Be a good fellow, will you," went on Nevile-Smythe, turning to Carolinus, "and tie it about my vambrace here on the shield arm. Thank you, Mage."

Carolinus, looking grim, tucked his staff into the crook of his arm and quickly tied the kerchief around the armor of Nevile-Smythe's lower left arm. As he tightened the final knot and let his hands drop away, the knight caught up his shield into position

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and drew his sword with his other hand. The bright blade flashed like a sudden streak of lightning in the sun, he leaned forward to throw the weight of his armor before him, and with a shout of *"A Neville-Smythe! Elinor! Elinor!"* he ran forward up the slope toward the approaching Worm.

Jim heard, but did not see, the clash of shell and steel that was their coming together. For just then everything began to happen at once. Up on the hill, Anark screamed suddenly in fury and launched himself down the slope in the air, wings spread like some great bomber gliding in for a crash landing. Behind Jim, there was the frenzied flapping of leathery wings as Secoh took to the air to meet him—but this was drowned by a sudden short, deep-chested cry, like a wordless shout; and, lifting his club, the ogre stirred and stepped clear of the boulders, coming forward and straight down the hill with huge, ground-covering strides.

"Good luck, boy," said Smrgol, in Jim's ear. "And Gorbash—" Something in the old dragon's voice made Jim turn his head to look at Smrgol. The ferocious red mouth-pit and enormous fangs were frighteningly open before him; but behind it Jim read a strange affection and concern in the dark dragon-eyes. "—remember," said the old dragon, almost softly, "that you are a descendant of Ortosh and Agtval, and Gleingul who slew the sea serpent on the tide-banks of the Gray Sands. And be therefore valiant. But remember too, that you are my only living kin and the last of our line . . . and be careful."

Then Smrgol's head was jerked away, as he swung about to face the coming together of Secoh and Anark in mid-air and bellowed out his own challenge. While Jim, turning back toward the Tower, had only time to take to the air before the rush of the ogre was upon him.

He had lifted on his wings without thinking—evidently this was dragon instinct when attacked. He was aware of the ogre suddenly before him, checking now, with its enormous hairy feet digging deep into the ground. The rust-bound club flashed before Jim's eyes and he felt a heavy blow high on his chest that swept him backward through the air.

He flailed with his wings to regain balance. The over-size idiot face was grinning only a couple of yards off from him. The club swept up for another blow. Panicked, Jim scrambled aside, and saw the ogre sway forward a step. Again the club lashed out—*quick!*—how could something so big and clumsy-looking be so quick with its hands? Jim felt himself smashed down to earth and a sudden lance of bright pain shot through his right shoulder. For a second a gray, thick-skinned forearm

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loomed over him and his teeth met in it without thought.

He was shaken like a rat by a rat terrier and flung clear. His wings beat for the safety of altitude, and he found himself about twenty feet off the ground, staring down at the ogre, which grunted a wordless sound and shifted the club to strike upwards. Jim cupped air with his wings, to fling himself backward and avoid the blow. The club whistled through the unfeeling air; and, sweeping forward, Jim ripped at one great blocky shoulder and beat clear. The ogre spun to face him, still grinning. But now blood welled and trickled down where Jim's teeth had gripped and torn, high on the shoulder.

—And suddenly, Jim realized something:

He was no longer afraid. He hung in the air, just out of the ogre's reach, poised to take advantage of any opening; and a hot sense of excitement was coursing through him. He was discovering the truth about fights—and about most similar things—that it is only the beginning that is bad. Once the chips are down, several million years of instinct take over and there is no time for thought for anything but confronting the enemy. So it was with Jim—and then the ogre moved in on him again; and that was his last specific intellectual thought of the fight, for everything else was drowned in his overwhelming drive to avoid being killed and, if possible, to kill, himself. . . .

IV

It was a long, blurred time, about which later Jim had no clear memory. The sun marched up the long arc of the heavens and crossed the nooning point and headed down again. On the torn-up sandy soil of the plain he and the ogre turned and feinted, smashed and tore at each other. Sometimes he was in the air, sometimes on the ground. Once he had the ogre down on one knee, but could not press his advantage. At another time they had fought up the long slope of the hill almost to the Tower and the ogre had him pinned in the cleft between two huge boulders and had hefted its club back for the final blow that would smash Jim's skull. And then he had wriggled free between the monster's very legs and the battle was on again.

Now and then throughout the fight he would catch brief kaleidoscopic glimpses of the combats being waged about him: Nevile-Smythe now wrapped about by the blind body of the Worm, its eye-stalks hacked away—and striving in silence to draw free his sword-arm, which was pinned to his side by the Worm's encircling body. Or there would roll briefly into Jim's vision a tangled roaring tumble of

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flailing leathery wings and serpentine bodies that was Secoh, Anark and old Smrgol. Once or twice he had a momentary view of Carolinus, still standing erect, his staff upright in his hand, his long white beard flowing forward over his blue gown with the cabalistic golden signs upon it, like some old seer in the hour of Armageddon. Then the gross body of the ogre would blot out his vision and he would forget all but the enemy before him.

The day faded. A dank mist came rolling in from the sea and fled in little wisps and tatters across the plain of battle. Jim's body ached and slowed, and his wings felt leaden. But the ever-grinning face and sweeping club of the ogre seemed neither to weaken nor to tire. Jim drew back for a moment to catch his breath; and in that second, he heard a voice cry out.

"Time is short!" it cried, in cracked tones. "We are running out of time. The day is nearly gone!"

It was the voice of Carolinus. Jim had never heard him raise it before with just such a desperate accent. And even as Jim identified the voice, he realized that it came clearly to his ears—and that for sometime now upon the battlefield, except for the ogre and himself, there had been silence.

He shook his head to clear it and risked a quick glance about him. He had been driven back almost to the neck of the Causeway itself, where it entered onto the plain. To one side of him, the snapped strands of Clarivaux's bridle dangled limply where the terrified horse had broken loose from the earth-thrust spear to which Nevile-Smythe had tethered it before advancing against the Worm on foot. A little off from it stood Carolinus, upheld now only by his staff, his old face shrunken and almost mummified in appearance, as if the life had been all but drained from it. There was nowhere else to retreat to; and Jim was alone.

He turned back his gaze to see the ogre almost upon him. The heavy club swung high, looking gray and enormous in the mist. Jim felt in his limbs and wings a weakness that would not let him dodge in time; and, with all his strength, he gathered himself, and sprang instead, up under the monster's guard and inside the grasp of those cannon-thick arms.

The club glanced off Jim's spine. He felt the arms go around him, the double triad of bone-thick fingers searching for his neck. He was caught, but his rush had knocked the ogre off his feet. Together they went over and rolled on the sandy earth, the ogre gnawing with his jagged teeth at Jim's chest and striving to break a spine or twist a neck, while Jim's tail lashed futilely about.

They rolled against the spear

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and snapped it in half. The ogre found its hold and Jim felt his neck begin to be slowly twisted, as if it were a chicken's neck being wrung in slow motion. A wild despair flooded through him. He had been warned by Smrgol never to let the ogre get him pinned. He had disregarded that advice and now he was lost, the battle was lost. *Stay away,* Smrgol had warned, *use your brains . . .*

The hope of a wild chance sprang suddenly to life in him. His head was twisted back over his shoulder. He could see only the gray mist above him, but he stopped fighting the ogre and groped about with both forelimbs. For a slow moment of eternity, he felt nothing, and then something hard nudged against his right foreclaw, a glint of bright metal flashed for a second before his eyes. He changed his grip on what he held, clamping down on it as firmly as his clumsy foreclaws would allow—

—and with every ounce of strength that was left to him, he drove the fore-part of the broken spear deep into the middle of the ogre that sprawled above him.

The great body bucked and shuddered. A wild scream burst from the idiot mouth alongside Jim's ear. The ogre let go, staggered back and up, tottering to its feet, looming like the Tower itself above him. Again, the ogre screamed, staggering about like a drunken man, fumbling at the shaft of the spear sticking from him. It jerked at the shaft, screamed again, and, lowering its unnatural head, bit at the wood like a wounded animal. The tough ash splintered between its teeth. It screamed once more and fell to its knees. Then slowly, like a bad actor in an old-fashioned movie, it went over on its side, and drew up its legs like a man with the cramp. A final scream was drowned in bubbling. Black blood trickled from its mouth and it lay still.

Jim crawled slowly to his feet and looked about him.

The mists were drawing back from the plain and the first thin light of late afternoon stretching long across the slope. In its rusty illumination, Jim made out what was to be seen there.

The Worm was dead, literally hacked in two. Nevile-Smythe, in bloody, dinted armor, leaned wearily on a twisted sword not more than a few feet off from Carolinus. A little farther off, Secoh raised a torn neck and head above the intertwined, locked-together bodies of Anark and Smrgol. He stared dazedly at Jim. Jim moved slowly, painfully over to the mere-dragon.

Jim came up and looked down at the two big dragons. Smrgol lay with his eyes closed and his jaws locked in Anark's throat. The neck of the younger dragon had been broken like the stem of a weed.

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"Smrgol . . ." croaked Jim.

"No—" gasped Secoh. "No good. He's gone. . . . I led the other one to him. He got his grip—and then he never let go. . . ." The mere-dragon choked and lowered his head.

"He fought well," creaked a strange harsh voice which Jim did not at first recognize. He turned and saw the Knight standing at his shoulder. Nevile-Smythe's face was white as sea-foam inside his helmet and the flesh of it seemed fallen in to the bones, like an old man's. He swayed as he stood.

"We have won," said Carolinus, solemnly, coming up with the aid of his staff. "Not again in our life-times will evil gather enough strength in this spot to break out." He looked at Jim. "And now," he said, "the balance of Chance and History inclines in your favor. It's time to send you back."

"Back?" said Nevile-Smythe.

"Back to his own land, Knight," replied the magician. "Fear not, the dragon left in this body of his will remember all that happened and be your friend."

"Fear!" said Nevile-Smythe, somehow digging up a final spark of energy to expend on hauteur. "I fear no dragon, dammit. Besides, in respect to the old boy here"—he nodded at the dead Smrgol—"I'm going to see what can be done about this dragon-alliance business."

"He was great!" burst out Secoh, suddenly, almost with a sob. "He—he made me strong again. Whatever he wanted, I'll do it." And the mere-dragon bowed his head.

"You come along with me then, to vouch for the dragon end of it," said Nevile-Smythe. "Well," he turned to Jim, "it's goodby, I suppose, Sir James."

"I suppose so," said Jim. "Goodby to you, too. I—" Suddenly he remembered.

"Angie!" he cried out, spinning around. "I've got to go get Angie out of that Tower!"

Carolinus put his staff out to halt Jim.

"Wait," he said. "Listen. . . ."

"Listen?" echoed Jim. But just at that moment, he heard it, a woman's voice calling, high and clear, from the mists that still hid the Tower.

"Jim! Jim, where are you?"

A slight figure emerged from the mist, running down the slope toward them.

"Here I am!" bellowed Jim. And for once he was glad of the capabilities of his dragon-voice. "Here I am, Angie—"

—but Carolinus was chanting in a strange, singing voice, words without meaning, but which seemed to shake the very air about them. The mist swirled, the world rocked and swung. Jim and Angie were caught up, were swirled about, were spun away and away down an echoing corridor of nothingness . . .

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. . . and then they were back in the Grille, seated together on one side of the table in the booth. Hanson, across from them, was goggling like a bewildered accident victim.

"Where—where am I?" he stammered. His eyes suddenly focused on them across the table and he gave a startled croak. "Help!" he cried, huddling away from them. "Humans!"

"What did you expect?" snapped Jim. "Dragons?"

"No!" shrieked Hanson. "Watch-beetles—like me!" And, turning about, he tried desperately to burrow his way through the wood seat of the booth to safety.

V

It was the next day after that Jim and Angie stood in the third floor corridor of Chumley Hall, outside the door leading to the office of the English Department.

"Well, are you going in or aren't you?" demanded Angie.

"In a second, in a second," said Jim, adjusting his tie with nervous fingers. "Just don't rush me."

"Do you suppose he's heard about Grottwold?" Angie asked.

"I doubt it," said Jim. "The Student Health Service says Hanson's already starting to come out of it—except that he'll probably always have a touch of amnesia about the whole afternoon. Angie!" said Jim, turning on her. "Do you suppose, all the time we were there, Hanson was actually being a watch-beetle underground?"

"I don't know, and it doesn't matter," interrupted Angie, firmly. "Honestly, Jim, now you've finally promised to get an answer out of Dr. Howells about a job, I'd think you'd want to get it over and done with, instead of hesitating like this. I just can't understand a man who can go about consorting with dragons and fighting ogres and then—"

"—still not want to put his boss on the spot for a yes-or-no answer," said Jim. "Hah! Let me tell you something." He waggled a finger in front of her nose. "Do you know what all this dragon-ogre business actually taught me? It wasn't not to be scared, either."

"All right," said Angie, with a sigh. "What was it then?"

"I'll tell you," said Jim. "What I found out . . ." He paused. "What I found out was not, not to be scared. It was that scared or not doesn't matter; because you just go ahead, anyway."

Angie blinked at him.

"And that," concluded Jim, "is why I agreed to have it out with Howells, after all. Now you know."

He yanked Angie to him, kissed her grimly upon her startled lips, and, letting go of her, turned about. Giving a final jerk to his tie, he turned the knob of the office door, opened it, and strode valiantly within.

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Ellery Queen once introduced a Dorothy Sayers story with the words, "Chiefly we liked A Matter of Taste *because it made us thirsty." I can say the same of this latest contribution by Miss Seabright—and I rejoice that it is the last story in this issue. Now I can knock off work and gratify the appetite which it arouses . . . and you, probably, will shortly find yourself doing likewise.*

The Wines of Earth

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

JOE DA VALORA GREW WINE IN THE Napa Valley. The growing of premium wine is never especially profitable in California, and Joe could have made considerably more money if he had raised soybeans or planted his acreage in prunes. The paperwork involved in his occupation was a nightmare to him; he filled out tax and license forms for state and federal governments until he had moments of feeling his soul was made out in triplicate, and he worked hard in the fields too. His son used to ask him why he didn't go into something easier. Sometimes he wondered himself.

But lovers of the vine, like all lovers, are stubborn and unreasonable men. And, as with other lovers, their unreasonableness has its compensations. Joe da Valora got a good deal of satisfaction from the knowledge that he made some of the best Zinfandel in California (the Pinot Noir, his first love, he had had to abandon as not coming to its full excellence in his particular part of the Napa Valley). He vintaged the best of his wine carefully, slaved over the vinification to bring out the wine's full freshness and fruitiness, and had once sold an entire year's product to one of the "big business" wineries, rather than bottling it himself, because he thought it had a faint but objectionable "hot" taste.

Joe da Valora lived alone. His wife was dead, and his son had married a girl who didn't like the country. Often they came to see him on Sundays, and they bought him expensive gifts at Christmas time. Still, his evenings were apt to be long. If he sometimes drank a little too much of his own prod-

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uct, so that he went to bed with the edges of things a bit blurred, it did him no harm. Dry red table wine is a wholesome beverage, and he was never any the worse for it in the morning. On the nights when things needed blurring, he was careful not to touch the vintaged Zinfandel. It was too good a wine to waste on things that had to be blurred.

Early in December, when the vintage was over and the new wine was quietly doing the last of its fermentation in the storage containers, he awoke to the steady drumming of rain on his roof. Well. He'd get caught up on his bookkeeping. He hoped the rain wouldn't be too hard. Eight of his acres were on a hillside, and after every rain he had to do some re-terracing.

About eleven, when he was adding up a long column of figures, he felt a sort of soundless jarring in the air. He couldn't tell whether it was real, or whether he had imagined it. Probably the latter. His hearing wasn't any too good these days. He shook his head to clear it, and poured himself a glass of the unvintaged Zinfandel.

After lunch the rain stopped and the sky grew bright. He finished his noon-time glass of wine and started out for a breath of air. As he left the house he realized that he was just a little, little tipsy. Well, that wasn't such a bad way for a vintner to be. He'd go up to the hillside acres and see how they did.

There had been very little soil washing, he saw, inspecting the hillside. The reterracing would be at a minimum. In fact, most of the soil removal he was doing himself, on the soles of his boots. He straightened up, feeling pleased.

Ahead of him on the slope four young people were standing, two men and two girls.

Da Valora felt a twinge of annoyance and alarm. What were they doing here? A vineyard out of leaf isn't attractive, and the hillside was well back from the road. He'd never had any trouble with vandals, only with deer. If these people tramped around on the wet earth, they'd break the terracing down.

As he got within speaking distance of them, one of the girls stepped forward. She had hair of an extraordinary copper-gold, and vivid, intensely turquoise eyes. (The other girl had black hair, and the two men were dark blonds.) Something about the group puzzled da Valora, and then he located it. They were all dressed exactly alike.

"Hello," the girl said.

"Hello," da Valora answered. Now that he was near to them, his anxiety about the vines had left him. It was as if their mere proximity—and he was to experience this effect during all the hours they spent with him—as if their

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mere proximity both stimulated and soothed his intellect, so that cares and pettinesses dropped away from him, and he moved in a larger air. He seemed to apprehend whatever they said directly, in a deeper way than words are usually apprehended, and with a wonderful naturalness.

"Hello," the girl repeated. "We've come from"—somehow the word escaped Joe's hearing—"to see the vines."

"Well, now," said Joe, pleased, "have you seen enough of them? This planting is Zinfandel. If you have, we might go through the winery. And then we might sample a little wine."

Yes, they would like to. They would all like that.

They moved beside him in a group, walking lightly and not picking up any of the wet earth on their feet. As they walked along they told him about themselves. They were winegrowers themselves, the four of them, though they seemed so young, in a sort of loose partnership, and they were making a winegrowers' tour of—of—

Again Joe's hearing failed him. But he had the fancy that there would never be any conflict of will among the four of them. Their tastes and wishes would blend like four harmonious voices, the women's high and clear, the men's richer and more deep. Yet it seemed to him that the copper-haired girl was regarded with a certain deference by her companions, and he thought, wisely, that he knew the reason. It was what he had so often told his wife—that when a lady really likes wine, when she really has a palate for it, nobody can beat her judgment. So the others respected her.

He showed them through the winery without shame, without pride. If there were bigger wineries than his in the Napa Valley, there were smaller ones too. And he knew he made good wine.

Back in the house he got out a bottle of his vintaged Zinfandel, the best Zinfandel he had ever made, for them. It wasn't only that they were fellow growers, he also wanted to please them. It was the '51.

As he poured the dark, fragrant stuff into their glasses he said, "What did you say the name of your firm was? Where did you say you were from?"

"It isn't exactly a firm," the dark-haired girl said, laughing. "And you wouldn't know the name of our home star."

Star? Star? Joe da Valora's hand shook so that he dribbled wine outside the glass. But what else had he expected? Hadn't he known from the moment he had seen them standing on the hillside? Of course they were from another star.

"And you're making a tour . . . ?" he asked, putting down the bottle carefully.

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"Of the nearer galaxy. We have only a few hours to devote to earth."

They drank. Joe da Valora wasn't surprised when only one of the men, the darker blond, praised the wine with much vigor. No doubt they'd tasted better. He wasn't hurt; they'd never want to hurt him—or at least not much hurt.

Yet as he looked at the four of them sitting around his dining table—so young, so wise, so kind—he was fired with a sudden honorable ambition. If they were only going to be here a few hours, then it was up to him, since nobody else could do it—it was up to him to champion the wines of Earth.

"Have you been to France?" he asked.

"France?" the dark-haired girl answered.

"Wait," he told them, "wait. I'll be back." He went clattering down the cellar stairs.

In the cellar, he hesitated. He had a few bottles of the best Pinot Noir grown in the Napa Valley; and that meant—nobody could question it—the best Pinot Noir grown in California. But which year should he bring? The '43 was the better balanced, feminine, regal, round, and delicate. The '42 was a greater wine, but its inherent imbalance and its age had made it arrive at the state that winemakers call fragile. One bottle of it would be glorious, the next vapid, passé and flat.

In the end, he settled on the '42. He'd take his chances. Just before he left the cellar, he picked up another bottle and carried it up with him. It was something his son had given him a couple of years ago; he'd been saving it for some great occasion. After all, he was championing the wines of *Earth*.

He opened the '42 anxiously. It was too bad he hadn't known about their coming earlier. The burgundy would have benefited by longer contact with the air. But the first whiff of the wine's great nose reassured him; this bottle was going to be all right.

He got clean glasses, the biggest he had, and poured an inch of the wine into them. He watched wordlessly as they took the wine into their mouths, swished it around on their palates, and chewed it, after the fashion of winetasters everywhere. The girl with the copper hair kept swirling her glass and inhaling the wine's perfume. He waited tensely for what she would say.

At last she spoke. "Very sound. Very good."

Joe da Valora felt a pang of disappointment whose intensity astonished him. He looked at the girl searchingly. Her face was sad. But she was honest. "Very sound, very good," was all that she could say.

Well, he still had an arrow left in his quiver. Even if it wasn't a

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California arrow. His hands were trembling as he drew the cork out of the bottle of Romanée-Conti '47 his son had given him. (Where had Harold got it? The wine, da Valora understood, was rare even in France. But the appellation of origin was in order. Harold must have paid a lot for it.)

More glasses. The magnificent perfume of the wine rose to his nose like a promise. Surely this . . .

There was a long silence. The girl with the dark hair finished her wine and held out her glass for more. At last the other girl said, "A fine wine. Yes, a fine wine."

For a moment Joe da Valora felt he hated her. Her, and the others. Who were these insolent young strangers, to come to Earth, drink the flower, the cream, the very pearl, of Earth's vintages, and dismiss them with so slight a compliment? Joe had been drinking wine all his life. In the hierarchy of fine wines, the Zinfandel he made was a petty princeling; the Pinot '42 was a great lord; but the wine he had just given them to drink was the sovereign, unquestioned emperor. He didn't think it would be possible to grow a better wine on earth.

The girl with the copper-gold hair got up from the table. "Come to our ship," she said. "Please. We want you to taste the wine we make."

Still a little angry, Joe went with them. The sun was still well up, but the sky was getting overcast. It would rain again before night.

The ship was in a hollow behind the hillside vineyard. It was a big silver sphere, flattened at the bottom, that hovered a few feet above the rows of vines. The copper-haired girl took his hand, touched a stud at her belt, and they rose smoothly through the flattened bottom into a sort of foyer. The others followed them.

The ship's interior made little impression on Joe da Valora. He sat down on a chair of some sort and waited while the copper-haired girl went into a pantry and came back with a bottle.

"Our best wine," she said, holding it out for him to see.

The container itself was smaller and squatter than an Earth bottle. From it she poured a wine that was almost brownish. He was impressed by its body even in the glass.

He swirled the wine glass. It seemed to him he smelled violets and hazelnuts, and some other perfume, rich and delicate, whose name he didn't know. He could have been satisfied for a half hour, only inhaling the wine's perfume. At last he sipped at it.

"Oh," he said when he had swished it in his mouth, let it bathe his palate, and slowly trickle down his throat. "Oh."

"We don't make much of it," she

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said, pouring more into his glass. "The grapes are so hard to grow."

"Thank you," he said. "Now I see why you said, 'A fine wine.'"

"Yes. We're sorry, dear Earth man."

"Don't be sorry," he said, smiling. He felt no sting of inferiority, no shame for Earth. The distance was too great. You couldn't expect Earth vines to grow the wine of paradise.

They were all drinking now, taking the wine in tiny sips, so he saw how precious it was to them. But first one and then the other of them would fill his glass.

The wine was making him bold. He licked his lips, and said, "Cuttings? Could you . . . give me cuttings? I'd take them to, to the University. To Davis." Even as he spoke he knew how hopeless the words were.

The darker blond man shook his head. "They wouldn't grow on Earth."

The bottle was empty. Once or twice one of the four had gone to a machine and touched buttons and punched tapes on it. He knew they must be getting ready to go.

"Goodby," he said. "Thank you." He held out his hand to them in leave-taking. But all of them, the men too, kissed him lightly and lovingly on the cheek.

"Goodby, dear human man," the girl with the copper hair said. "Goodby, goodby."

He left the ship. He stood at a distance and watched it lift lightly and effortlessly to the height of the trees. There was a pause, while the ship hovered and he wondered anxiously if something had gone wrong. Then the ship descended a few feet and the copper-haired girl jumped lightly out of it. She came running toward him, one of the small, squat bottles in her hand. She held it out to him.

"I can't take it—" he said.

"Oh, yes. You must. We want you to have it." She thrust it into his hands.

She ran back to the ship. It rose again, shimmered, and was gone.

Joe da Valora looked at where the ship had been. The gods had come and gone. Was this how Dionysus had come to the Greeks? Divine, bearing a cargo that was divine? Now that they were gone, he realized how much in love with them he had been.

At last he drew a long sigh. He was where he had always been. His life would go on as it always had. Taxes, licenses, a mountain of paperwork, bad weather, public indifference, the attacks of local-optionists—all would be as it had been. But he had the bottle of wine they had given him. He knew there would never, in all his foreseeable life (he was sixty-five), be an event happy enough to warrant his opening it. But they had given him one of their last three bottles.

He was smiling as he went back to the house.

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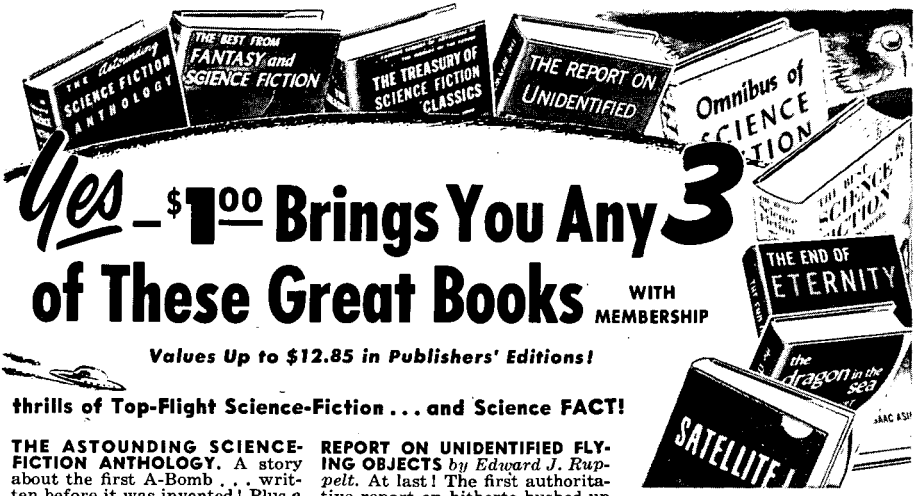
—continued from Back Cover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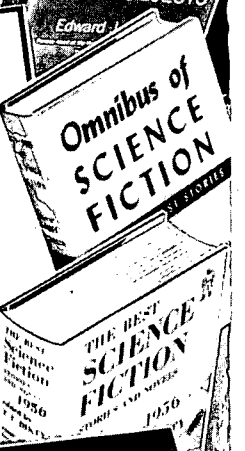

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